



My
Friend's
Little
Sister

Has It
IN
for
Me!

Author:
mikawaghost
Illustration:
tomari





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My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me!

Characters



Kohinata Iroha

First year. Plays a polite honor student at school, but is annoying to Akiteru. A talented actress. She's the type to get majorly hyped at theme park parades.



Kohinata Ozuma

Second year. Nicknamed Ozu. Akiteru's only friend, and the programmer of the 05th Floor Alliance. Likes to use rollercoasters to study mechanics.



Otoi [redacted]

Second year. Her given name is private. She's a sound engineer who helps out the 05th Floor Alliance. Always on the lookout for limited-edition desserts when at a theme park.



Tomosaka Sasara

First year. Iroha's former rival, the two are now friends. Social media influencer. She'd like to film a livestream from a rollercoaster someday.



Ooboshi Akiteru

Second year. The protagonist and the 05th Floor Alliance's producer. Values efficiency above all else. At theme parks, he likes to make use of a fast pass to get around as efficiently as possible.



Tsukinomori Mashiro

Second year. Akiteru's cousin and fake girlfriend. In love with Akiteru. She is secretly the popular author Makigai Namako. Feels right at home in a haunted house.



Kageishi Sumire

Math teacher and the talented artist Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. A twenty-five-year-old who loves go-karts, but has just enough sense not to ride them while drunk.



Kageishi Midori

Second year. A phenomenal honor student who gets full marks in every subject. Though her acting skills suck, she's head of the drama club. After being rejected by Akiteru, she's in the mood to let the ferris wheel fix her broken heart.



Kiraboshi Kanaria

Makigai Namako's editor, who brings her idol talents to the job. Chirps at the end of her sentences. Secretly considers popular theme park mascots her rivals.

Recap

Relationships are unnecessary. Friends are unnecessary; well, more than one, anyway. And girlfriends are *definitely* unnecessary. The way most people spend their youth is horribly inefficient, and it used to be my policy to shed everything unnecessary in order to get ahead in life. My name is Ooboshi Akiteru, and right now I am wrapped up in major teenage drama.

Mashiro was taking advantage of the class trip to ramp up her efforts to win me over, and as I socialized with my classmates, I was experiencing a different kind of fun to the one I got from my work. But it wasn't all carefree fun: Kageishi Midori, little sister to 05th Floor Alliance illustrator Murasaki Shikibu-sensei (aka Kageishi Sumire), threw me for a loop when she confessed to me.

"I am very much in love with you. QED!"

While it had all the clumsiness of a first-love confession, her nerves of steel and headstrong personality allowed her to deliver that blazing fastball of feelings refreshingly clearly, and she was so to the point about it that even somebody as dense as me had no choice but to acknowledge how she felt.

As I tried to figure out my feelings in return, I saw the face of the girl I liked in my head, leading me to turn Midori down.

The girl I liked. Who was she exactly?

She was always right there.

She was so fragile, I worried she might shatter into a million pieces if I didn't reach out for her.

She never failed to inspire these strange feelings within me whenever we were together.

Until now, I'd always looked the other way, scared that if I acknowledged how I felt about her, everything would change irreversibly. Keeping up that pretense was no longer possible. I doubted I'd even be able to be myself around her anymore.

The class trip would be drawing to a close soon.

It wouldn't be long now until all the tangled threads of my relationships would be smoothed out and converge into one, and the truth behind every last secret would spill.

Prologue

I had the vague thought that I didn't recognize the ceiling.

According to my phone, it was six in the morning.

Routine was a shocking thing. Even when I was far away from home, my body was tuned to its usual timetable. It was the same reason jet lag was such a pain. Not that jet lag *could* be a problem, since I'd only gone as far as Kyoto.

I, Ooboshi Akiteru, had always been determined to live as efficiently as possible, which was why I woke up at the exact same time every day. That was six in the morning unless something really out of the ordinary was going on, because lately I'd been getting into the habit of doing some early morning running or other exercise to get my mind and body into shape.

More recently, I'd had days where I ended up oversleeping thanks to Iroha turning her pestering up to eleven. That didn't count, because it was her fault. *She'd* be the one the jury found guilty.

Now, though, I was on the class trip. I didn't need to be awake this early, but my body didn't get the memo.

I yawned. "Dammit, it feels like I barely got any rest at all..." My thoughts were floating around, disconnected. I shook my head and rubbed my eyes.

Correction. I didn't actually wake up early. In fact, it was the opposite.

After Midori's confession last night, the face of the girl I liked had kept flickering through my mind, even when my eyes were closed; I didn't get a wink of sleep. Even though I prided myself on staying in tip-top shape, I messed up last night by going to bed way too late. At the very least, I'd heard that even just closing your eyes in the darkness was enough to give your mind *some* rest, so it beat pulling an all-nighter. I was glad to have that knowledge; it made me feel a little better.

"I guess everyone else is... Nah, there's no way they'd be awake yet. Wonder what I should do..."

I looked around the room. My roommates, Ozu and the muscle maniac Suzuki, were both fast asleep in their beds. Ozu was as still and silent as a computer in sleep mode, but Suzuki snored more than loud enough for two. Even the way they slept matched their personalities to a T.

I decided to clear my sleep-fogged mind by going to the bathroom and washing my face. I studied myself in the mirror; I had light bags under my eyes. The sight of myself in less-than-healthy shape disgusted me, so I quickly pulled on a tracksuit and left the bathroom.

What do you mean that doesn't make sense? It *does*. When your body's out of whack, all it takes is an early morning run to fix it. That is not a guarantee, and I can't take any responsibility for that claim, so don't try it at home.

Yesterday, the Class Trip Committee explained that we were welcome to use any of the hotel's various facilities during our stay. These included both the indoor facilities and the outdoor ones, such as the tennis court and running course, which meant I didn't have to worry about getting in trouble or looking weird for running around outside this early in the morning.

I left the room quietly so I wouldn't wake up my roommates, then sneaked to the hotel lobby. The lobby was deserted; there weren't even any of our teachers here.

Perfect, I thought, hurrying past the empty lounge. I showed the receptionist my student ID, explained that I was going to use the running course, and then stepped outside. The receptionist had looked a little surprised. Maybe it wasn't especially popular?

But the reason for that reaction was cleared up the moment I set foot outside.

"Can I run with you?"

Mashiro was sitting on the bench by the course's start point, retying her shoelaces. She wore a tracksuit. No wonder the receptionist looked surprised.

"Sure."

This was a class trip. What were the chances of coming across *two* health junkies heading out to run this early in the morning?

We began our leisurely run around the hotel grounds, side by side. The leaves in the trees rustled in the cool fall breeze. To our right was the empty tennis court. It felt like we were the only two people left in a postapocalyptic world. It was strangely stirring.

I glanced at Mashiro beside me. Her face looked more beautiful than I was used to, possibly because of Midori's confession last night. I knew I was being weird today the moment that thought struck me.

I was running at a much slower pace than normal so that Mashiro (who didn't have much endurance) could keep up with me. That was odd behavior for me too—it was far from efficient.

While knowing it wasn't like me at all, I teasingly asked Mashiro, "What's gotten into you, then? You've only just stopped being a shut-

in. Now you've decided you might as well go the whole hog and start exercising?"

"No. I hate exercise. Anyone who makes me do it can go die in a fire."

"That sounds kinda extremist."

"I needed to talk to you."

"Thought so." Otherwise she wouldn't have gone on ahead to wait for me.

"Do you remember our reunion?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Wait, so you remember seeing my underwear? Gross."

"You totally set me up there!"

If she hadn't said that, I probably wouldn't have remembered that whole incident in the first place. We'd had an unfortunate encounter in the unisex bathroom of the diner Tsukinomori-san had called me to—thanks to the lock being broken. It was a pretty awkward reunion, to put it mildly.

"We met again in the worst way possible. But apart from that, I was really glad to see you again."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't exactly—"

"I know," Mashiro cut in. "You didn't think about anything except the Alliance back then. You made that contract with dad for no other reason than to get its members a better future."

"Pretty scummy, huh?"

"And do you remember when you started hounding me like a stalker—"

"Yeah, 'cause you were ignoring me. That welcome party was for you, y'know."

"That didn't mean you had to go *that* far, right? Stuffing my mailbox full of posters and following me around after school... You practically pushed me down in that river and got me all wet."

"Uh, well, you know what it's like, being young and impulsive... I really wanted you to be a part of our group."

"Yeah, I know that too. That's the kinda person you are." Mashiro giggled, slightly out of breath because of the running. From her face, it looked like she could keep going. She was tougher than she had been back then, probably because she was no longer a shut-in and was following a healthier lifestyle. "And do you remember when we were at Canary-san's villa..."

The memories kept on coming, one after the other. The path we'd walked together, just like a clip show. It was like coming across an open photo album while packing for a vacation, and taking a little trip down memory lane.

By the time we were done reminiscing, both of us were breathing

quite heavily.

“You’re my boyfriend, Aki.”

“Fake boyfriend, yeah.”

“A boyfriend is duty bound to listen to his girlfriend’s wishes, right?”

“Not legally, no. But I do think it’s only fair to hear you out.”

“Good. Well...”

Until then, Mashiro’s voice had come from right next to me. Now, it came from a small distance behind where I expected it to, and I came to an abrupt stop. I turned around to see that Mashiro had stopped too. Her silver bangs shone in the rising morning sun, and between them I could see her eyes sparkling like jewels. They were fixed right on me.

“I want us to break up.”

Tsukinomori Mashiro.

My friend’s little sister, my cousin, my childhood friend, and my fake girlfriend, wanted to break up with me.

“Guess she got tired of you being so indecisive all the time, huh?”

“Could be...”

“Only *you* would take that idea seriously. This is what makes you so useless and dense, y’know that?”

“You know, Ozu, I think spending so much time with Mashiro’s rubbing off on you. It’s not like you to insult me like that.”

“I’m just sayin’ what everyone’s thinking. And I mean *everyone*.”

Chapter 1: My Recently Ex-(fake)-Girlfriend Has a Date with Me!

There was a huge restaurant on the first floor of the hotel we were staying at. It had space for more than a hundred guests. Large companies used it to train their new employees, but it was also used for prestigious ceremonies, cabaret by famous singers, and even formal marriage parties. The menu and interior design were swapped out between morning and evening; in the mornings, they served a buffet-style breakfast. The center of the room was filled with buffet stations offering dishes and fruit in every color of the rainbow.

It was eight in the morning. The classes were staggered by an hour each for breakfast: seven, eight, or nine. Our class's breakfast was at eight. It was normal for students to be up at this time under normal circumstances, but a lot of them looked like they hadn't slept much the night before; they were yawning and swaying as they filled their plates.

I could understand that this was a special occasion, but that didn't make sleep any less important. Teenagers these days were so irresponsible. Sure, I hadn't had enough sleep either, but that was fine, as long as I didn't think too hard about it. It was my philosophy that you couldn't die from a hemorrhage if you didn't know about it.

Now you might think that doesn't make any sense, and actually, I think so too. My brain wasn't working right this morning—partly because I hadn't slept properly, and partly from the shock of Mashiro breaking up with me.

"Something happen, Aki?" Ozu asked as we headed back to our table to join our group.

"Wh-What makes you say that?"

"The food on your plate." He pointed at my tray of fried chicken, fish and chips, fried mackerel, french fries, fried shrimp, and tempura. Every single item was wrapped in a crispy brown coat, each with its own texture. "You're always going on about being healthy, and now you're having fried everything for breakfast. 'Course I'm gonna think your brain's glitched or something."

"Hey, you're right. I didn't even notice..."

"You're kidding?"

"Maybe my body just wants to wither away."

"Sounds dangerous." Ozu smiled. Clearly my genuine troubles

were nothing more than entertainment to him. “So, what happened?”

“Mashiro and I...broke up.”

“What?” Ozu’s eyes flew open. “Your relationship wasn’t even real, though. It was part of your contract to get a job for the Alliance.”

“Yeah. And Mashiro wanted out.”

“Huh. Isn’t that kinda sudden?”

“I’ll say. I still have no idea what’s going on.”

I thought back to my conversation with Mashiro that morning. Her request came right out of the blue, and even more confusing was the fact that I knew she liked me. Why would *she* want our relationship to end? Was it that she didn’t like me anymore, or was there something else to it? My head had been spinning with countless questions ever since it happened.

After Midori’s confession last night, I’d figured out who the girl was that I (supposedly) liked. I now knew that it was finally time to face my feelings and come to terms with what they meant. That was confusing enough as it was. And then on top of that, Mashiro suddenly decided to break up with me for some unknown reason? It was a miracle my brain was still in one piece.

“I thought you couldn’t break up, though.”

“I dunno why,” I said, “but Mashiro said Tsukinomori-san was okay with it. He said we could break up, and he’d still give us all a gig at Honeyplace Works.”

“Right... Makes you wonder. It all seems a little *too* convenient.”

“Took the words right outta my mouth.”

When I had tried to ask Mashiro what the deal was, she just smiled at me serenely and promised that I would “know soon enough,” before going back inside.

There was definitely some sort of hidden meaning to her words, and I’d been ruminating on it this whole time. I was even still anxious about it now, at breakfast.

“Did you ask Tsukinomori-san?”

“Yeah, I messaged him on LIME. He didn’t tell me much, but Mashiro wasn’t lying. Said something about how it was probably ‘cause Mashiro was all mature and independent now, and didn’t need me looking after her anymore—like he’s not her dad. I’m sure he’s hiding something from me too.”

“He didn’t make it to CEO for nothing. Keeping secrets and pulling invisible strings is a part of his job. An annoying part.”

“Yep. And what’s even more annoying is—”

“Come *on*, Ooboshi! You’re taking forever! Your lovely girlfriend’s gonna be in a retirement home by the time you’re done!”

“—now I’m gonna have to figure out how to explain everything to these guys.”

Our group was impatiently waiting for us; they were already sitting down with their food. Actually, it wasn't so much our group as the one girl who lived according to her wild, animalistic instincts: Takamiya Asuka.

"What're you mutterin' about, Ooboshi? Got a problem?"

"No. Stop yelling."

"Oh, okay! Let's hurry up and get eatin' then! You guys ready?"

Takamiya turned to the other girls at the table.

"Yes." Mashiro put her hands together politely and turned to face her plate. "Let's eat."

Next to her was the scholarly Maihama Kyouko, who promptly started to splutter around the spoon in her mouth. "Aff! I-I-I'm swowwy! I aweady swarted eatimgh!"

"Damn, Kyouko-chin," Takamiya said. "You put on an innocent face, but really you're a hungry bottomless pit, huh?"

"Oh no, how embarrassing... Please drop it!"

"So what if she's got a healthy appetite?" Suzuki said. "Nothin' wrong with that, right, Maihama?"

"Hey! You're only saying that 'cause you started eating early too! Are Mashiro-chin and I the only ones with any manners left in the world? Kids these days, I *swear*!"

I'd overheard from the girls during the trip that Takamiya was a member of the school's track and field club. That would explain why she cared so much when it came to manners, despite her wild personality in everything else. Sports clubs tended to cultivate those sorts of attitudes.

Spending time on the class trip with my group had helped me get to know them quite a bit. A person's personality comes out more clearly in the smaller details, such as what they choose to put on their plates from the buffet. Takamiya's plate was centered on red meat and protein. Maihama had made the very feminine choice of scrambled eggs and bread, and Suzuki was obviously thinking with his muscles, having picked yogurt, a banana, and a protein drink. I knew Mashiro well enough to guess that she'd picked the grilled fish—and I was right. As for Ozu, he'd stepped away from his usual choices and gone for a mix of ordinary things with a good nutritional balance.

There was actually a little bit of deviance behind Ozu's selection. My friend's breakfast philosophy was that he didn't care what he ate, as long as it benefited his health in some way. More often than not, he'd just take dietary supplements. I'd warned him beforehand that having those for breakfast would make him look like a weirdo on the class trip and that he shouldn't do it, so he'd switched to a proper meal today.

I didn't especially *like* making comments on Ozu's eating habits,

but I felt it was necessary to help him fit in with the other students. He could have all the diet supplements he wanted when they weren't around.

Speaking of commenting on eating habits, my own plate was loaded with fried food. And *I* worried about *Ozu* being the weirdo. Racked with guilt, I shot a glance at Mashiro. "I'm gonna sit across from you."

"You don't have to ask permission for that. Just sit down."

"Okay..." I followed her instruction tentatively. I was used to Mashiro being curt; it just felt extra awkward today. Probably because of what happened between us that morning. Or maybe it was because of the feelings I'd discovered inside me after talking with Midori last night. In which case, it was probably best I try to act nonchalant about the whole thing. These feelings had to stay with me—no one else could be allowed to pick up on them.

"By the way, Ooboshi, did something happen between you and Kageishi-san from the advanced class?" Takamiya asked.

"No, siree, nothing at all!" My voice cracked; the sharpest of questions had come out of absolutely nowhere. If she could switch off her impressive, animalistic sense of smell for *just* a little bit, that'd be great, thanks. "Wh-Why d'you ask?"

"Why d'you think? I'm not just sayin' stuff at random, y'know. Look over there." Takamiya pointed over to the tables where the advanced class was sitting—which included Midori, of course.

"Wow, Kageishi-san, I didn't know you liked fried food that much!"

"What, oh, um, yes... Strange, this food group has a terrible effect on one's brain power, and yet I've piled my plate with it... Perhaps I have a secret wish for my body to wither away from the inside." Midori let out a hollow laugh from behind her plate, which was loaded with foods wrapped in golden breadcrumbs.

I looked down at the plate in front of me.

It was an exact copy of hers; everything on it was the exact same shade of golden brown.

"See?" Takamiya grinned, smug.

I groaned.

The fact that we'd picked out a similar breakfast obviously proved nothing, but Takamiya's illogical hunch that it meant *something* was annoyingly right on the money.

Takamiya leaned forward, begging me to spill the juicy details. Maihama said nothing, but her eyes were sparkling with obvious curiosity. Muscleman Suzuki had also jumped on the bandwagon, poking me in the ribs with his buff elbow in an effort to get me to talk.

With the pressure piling on me, I was struggling to come up with a response when help came my way—from an unexpected direction.

“It’s my fault Aki’s acting so weird.”

The entire group spun around to face Mashiro.

She started to explain matter-of-factly while deftly using her chopsticks to pick out the bones from her fish. “We broke up. It was my idea, and I don’t think he was expecting it, which is probably why he’s filling up on empty calories. This has nothing to do with Midorisan.”

“Oooh, is that all?” Takamiya sighed. “I guess it’s only natural his mind’s all messed up after gettin’ dumped by you. Now it makes sense.”

“Wait, Asuka-chan, didn’t you hear what she just said?!” Maihama turned to Mashiro. “U-Um, Mashiro-chan, is it true? Did you and Ooboshi-kun really break up?”

“Wait, they *broke up*?!”

“This is why you need to listen more carefully to people, Asuka-chan! That was the most important part of what Mashiro-chan said!”

“Sorry! I guess my brain ignored it because it was high on the list of stuff that would literally never happen. So, wait, you guys broke up? But you were all over each other! Or is the honeymoon period over or somethin’?”

She really thought Mashiro was that shallow, huh? Though I don’t know how else she was going to interpret it, with the timing as sudden as it was.

“We broke up,” Mashiro repeated simply, unperturbed by the girls’ confused reactions. “There’s nothing more to it than that.”

Suzuki shot me a worried glance from the seat next to me, the bicep peeking out from under his rolled-up sleeve twitching. Could this guy not keep his muscles still, even when he was being sympathetic?

Maybe I could give him a break, actually. This news was as much of a surprise to my classmates as it was to me. Perhaps even more so, since they didn’t know that our relationship was fake from the start.

“Wait, this is actually horrible... Today’s the best day of the class trip, where you get to do whatever you want, and now...” Takamiya’s gaze flicked between Mashiro and me repeatedly. She was rough around the edges, but she sure was kind; she seemed as concerned as though this were *her* relationship coming to an end. “Hold up a sec. If you guys are done, you’re not gonna be hanging around each other today, right? *Right*? Which means we get to hog Mashiro-chin for the entire day! So this is actually great! You just gotta put a positive spin on it! Yahoo!”

“Who the heck says ‘yahoo’ when their friend breaks up with her

boyfriend?" I said without thinking.

Forget what I said about Takamiya being kind. She operated solely on instinct, regardless of morality. I had to admit, though, in some cases—like this one—it was very convenient of her.

"Where d'you wanna go, then? We could go grab some dessert, like some *ujikintoki*, if you wanna! ...Ack!"

Mashiro pushed Takamiya's face away with one hand. "Stay away from me. I'm not gonna eat anything with you."

"Hwuah? Hyua nowth comthingh wiff utth?" Takamiya asked, her face still the shape of a boxer's who'd just had it punched in. I *think* she said something like: "You're not coming with us?"

Mashiro's face was perfectly composed as she said, "I'm spending my free time with Aki. *Just* Aki." She looked at me. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Huh?"

For a second, I had no idea what she was asking me. The rest of the group seemed just as confused; they were all frowning at Mashiro too. Only Ozu's gaze had softened as he murmured an, "I see," under his breath, like her intentions were totally obvious (they weren't). You'd think he could let me in on this secret instead of being unnecessarily mysterious about it.

"You don't want to?" Mashiro asked.

"It's not that. It's just... How do I put this?"

As I fumbled for an answer, Mashiro stared intently at me. So intently, that I didn't even feel like pointing out she was going to get dry eyes unless she started blinking soon.

I couldn't even begin to guess what she was thinking—*she* was the one who ended our fake relationship. What did that mean for her feelings towards me? Did she still like me, or not? There was no denying the possibility that she broke up with me because she was genuinely over me.

But then, thinking back to how she acted towards me before this class trip, I was pretty sure she still felt just as strongly as she had on the day she confessed to me. That was the very reason I wanted her to have good memories of this trip, regardless of our fake relationship.

I didn't know what she was thinking, but I knew how I should answer her question.

"All right. Let's spend the day together."

"Okay. Thanks." Apparently deeply satisfied with my response, Mashiro gave a curt nod.

Now I was *sure* I was doing the right thing. Similarly satisfied, I took a bite of my fried chicken.

"I don't understand. You guys broke up, but now you're going out together?"

“It’s like a reverse honeymoon! It makes literally no sense but I’m here for it anyway! Talk about blessed!”

“So, you’re like...friends with benefits now?”

“Wait, what’s that? That sounds dirty!”

“That is dirty and gross, and there’s no way that’s what this is about! This is what I hate about guys! They can’t keep their minds outta the gutter!”

“Wait, is it true that Ooboshi is two-timing and Tsukinomori-san’s dropped to second place?”

Hold on. When did all these spectators get here? And what was with those rumors? It sounded like they were just making them up on the spot.

Our table was surrounded by other students listening in. Somehow, most of these students had caught wind of the fact that my (fake) relationship with Mashiro was over, but that we were going out on a date today for some reason anyway.

Word was going to get out about this eventually, so I guess it didn’t matter too much, but I would’ve preferred it if they had saved all of that for later. I spotted Midori in the corner of my eye; she caught my gaze, and I felt a prick of guilt.

“Is there anywhere you wanna go in particular?” I asked Mashiro after breakfast, as we returned our empty trays and cutlery.

“Yes,” she said immediately. The answer must have been ready in her head this entire time, because she wasted no time in saying,

“Tenchido Eternaland.”

“Wait, where am I in all of this? Where are the hot yaoi scenes, primarily featuring Ozuaki?”

“Nowhere and nowhere.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding! I’m Murasaki Shikibu-sensei! Everyone loves me! And just when they were thinking I was pure comic relief, they got to see me act all sexy and serious just before the class trip and decided to add my teacher persona to their spank bank—I mean, I’m sure there are *some* people who reacted like that—so I’ve gotta be in this volume *somewhere* or you’re gonna piss off all my fans!”

“That’s why I invited you into this section. This space is usually reserved for me and Aki, but today’s an exception.”

“Wait, what does *that* mean? Oh no! What have I done?! I’ve come between you and Aki!”

“Okay, you can get outta here now. You’re starting to piss *me* off.”

“What?! Now you sound like a total sadist! Stop wasting it on me and save it for your beloved Aki!”

“I’m just saying your time will come.”

“Oh, is that all? Heh heh. Now I’m raring to go!”



Takamiya Asuka

What do we all think?!!!



Suzuki Takeshi

About what?



Takamiya Asuka

Literally read the group name!!!



Takamiya Asuka

Things between Tsukinomori-san and Ooboshi are bad! I wanna know what happened!



Suzuki Takeshi

Oh, yeah, totally! Me too!



Takamiya Asuka

Right?!!!



Kohinata Ozuma

You sound so loud even through text, Takamiya-san.



Takamiya Asuka

I need to be, coz you can't hear text!!!



Kohinata Ozuma

lol, you're really entertaining.



Maihama Kyouko

Hello?!! Let's get back!!! On topic!!!



Maihama Kyouko

We're talking about Tsukinomori-san and Ooboshi-kun!!!



Kohinata Ozuma

Maihama-san?



Suzuki Takeshi

Are you sending messages while working out?



Maihama Kyouko

Forget I said anything...



Takamiya Asuka

Srsly tho, what do we think? Any guesses from how they're acting?



Takamiya Asuka

Do they still love each other, or has their love gone cold?!



Kohinata Ozuma

If I might be permitted to ask a question as a layman...



Maihama Kyouko

This is an academic lecture now?



Kohinata Ozuma

How do people generally act towards their crush?



Kohinata Ozuma

From there, we can observe Aki and Tsukinomori-san, and deduce from their behavior whether there is love between them.



Takamiya Asuka

OMG! You're a genius!



Maihama Kyouko

How do you act with the person you love, Asuka-chan?



Takamiya Asuka

I dunno! I've never been in love!



Maihama Kyouko

Huh...



Suzuki Takeshi

I stare at them without thinking about it. Like, I spot them, and then I'm just...staring.

OZ

Kohinata Ozuma

I see. You love them so much you want to look at them for as long as possible, whether that's an extra minute, or just an extra second.

OZ

Kohinata Ozuma

That's very understandable.



Maihama Kyouko

Um, is it?

OZ

Kohinata Ozuma

Any other opinions?



Maihama Kyouko

I might be the opposite like...I can't look at them.

OZ

Kohinata Ozuma

That's a thing too, huh?



Maihama Kyouko

Yes. Well, for me, at least...



Takamiya Asuka

(•∀•);D



Maihama Kyouko

Stop being obvious!

OZ

Kohinata Ozuma

Oh, I get it...

OZ

Kohinata Ozuma

Either you stare at them, or you can't bear to look them in the eye.

OZ

Kohinata Ozuma

Opposite reactions, yet both signs of romantic interest.

OZ

Kohinata Ozuma

I wonder which camp Aki falls into...

Interlude: Iroha, Mizuki, and Otoi-san

I had the vague thought that I didn't recognize the ceiling.

I rubbed my eyes and grabbed my phone next to my pillow to check the time. It was eight.

"Oh, crap!"

I jumped out of bed, terrified I'd be late for school, but I came to a complete stop when I realized this wasn't my room. This wasn't anything *like* a girl's room. The walls, bed, and everything else were a calming beige color.

I tottered over to the window and confirmed that I *definitely* wasn't on the fifth floor of anything. The beautiful face looking back at me belonged to none other than a certain somebody's friend's little sister, Kohinata Iroha. I stuck up a peace sign next to my sleepy face. It was a pointless thing to do, but it did give my brain a couple seconds to get in gear and bring my memory up to speed.

All righty. It was a weekday, but I was skipping school (plus I left early yesterday) so that I could come experience the shooting of a Hollywood movie with Mizuki-san. My friend Sasara had encouraged me to come; it was a unique opportunity to see a professional film set up close.

"Bon morning, Iroha-chan. Already are you ready— Oh, you are busy. Did I interrupt?"

"Hyaah! M-Mizuki-san?!" I pulled my hand away from my face, but it was too late. She totally saw me posing in front of my reflection! That's totally embarrassing!

I completely forgot about this, but I'd shared a hotel room with Mizuki-san last night. It was (apparently) a fifty-square-meter suite. It was really spacious; almost *too* much for just the two of us.

At first, Mizuki-san had said something about "sneaking me to a hotel room to grow our love," and I kind of freaked out, ready to get away *fast*, but then the room turned out to be huge, and her intentions turned out to be having a fun, lively chat before bed. So that was a relief.

The way she misused Japanese (and I didn't know if she was just ditzzy or mistaken) could be super terrifying at times. I knew she was a nice person at heart, though.

Mizuki-san snuck up on me again this morning. Like, she was too

casual, especially in the way she suddenly appeared behind me without a sound, as if she'd maxed out her stealth stat.

"I-I wasn't doing anything!" I said.

"Non. Look in the mirror, make it practice, it's an actress's obligation. It's important. I will praise you."

"Oh, uh. Aha ha ha! Th-Thank you?" I asked as she stroked my head approvingly.

I literally had no clue *what* I was getting rewarded for. I didn't know Mizuki-san very well, but I did wonder how much closer we'd have to get for me to start properly understanding her. It was like her true self went deeper than the Mariana Trench, and it was impossible to see the bottom.

You know, if someone asked me to play Tsukinomori Mizuki as a role, I was sure I'd just tell them it was never gonna happen, without a second thought.

But that was only if someone asked me *now*. I was determined to be able to play her at some point. That was why I was here, after all.

After stroking my head a little longer, Mizuki-san gave me a little push and said it was time to get going. The morning shoot was about to start.

I quickly gulped down the jelly drink I bought yesterday, made sure I was presentable, then dashed out of the room just a few minutes after Mizuki-san.

We were heading for a corner of Gion. A group of apprentice geisha in zori sandals shuffled as they led us down a retro, stone-paved road, lined on both sides by the kind of wooden buildings I'd only ever seen in period dramas. At the end of the road was a five-storied pagoda. It was like the traditional Kyoto equivalent of the Sky Tree or Tokyo Tower in the capital.

Right... I was in Kyoto! I was *actually* in Kyoto!

It really hit home I was there when I saw just how modern the area around the station was. It was a huge relief to feel that way at all.

As I stood smack dab in the middle of that super traditional part of town, I heard...

"This way!"

"The lighting team's delayed!"

...perfect native-sounding English, sticking out like a loud, sore thumb.

Part of the road was restricted to the public, and there were members of the Hollywood film crew running this way and that. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but they wore serious expressions. It was enough to make *me* nervous, even though I wasn't in the cast.

It looked like they weren't able to block off public access

completely; there were a few ordinary people walking past nearby. Lots of them had gathered to watch too, so it can't have been every day there was an obvious film shoot in the city. There was a traditional dessert place nearby, where customers were watching from the benches out in front. For example, one of them was a red-haired girl in a school uniform.

I figured she was a high schooler on a class trip. She was looking this way with eyes so droopy it looked like she was going to fall asleep any second, and she seemed to have as much energy in her body as a sloth.

"Hm?" Our eyes met. Though I would've thought she'd be more interested in the Hollywood movie crew, she was staring at me instead. "Wait... Aaah!" My yelp seemed to confirm to her I was who she thought I was, and she waved at me.

It took me a second to realize it because of how far away she was, but I *knew* this red-haired girl: it was Otoi-san. And now that I looked closer, I realized her uniform was the one from our school.

I rushed up to her and asked, "What are you doing here?!"

"Sup, Kohinata. Thought it was you. Doesn't it make less sense that *you're* here?"

"You're totally right!"

I mean, *I* was supposed to be in school. Otoi-san was supposed to be *here*, on her class trip.

But wait, if Otoi-san was here, did that mean Senpai might be nearby? My eyes started darting all over the place, looking for him.

"Aki's not here."

"Ack! A-Aw, c'mon! You're making it sound like I got my hopes up that Senpai might be around here or something!"

"You're really gonna try and play dumb with me? Eh, whatever."

"Hnngh... I guess you've got a point..." Otoi-san already knew about my feelings for Senpai, after all. It was just annoying to have to admit it, or maybe it was just my delicate feminine instincts making me want to deny it. Stupid idiot.

Oh, by the way, that was directed at Senpai and not Otoi-san, so hopefully she wasn't reading my thoughts right now, and if she were, she'd forgive me.

"Isn't it weird that you're here, Otoi-san?"

"How d'you figure?" Otoi-san cocked her head.

When I'd looked around, I hadn't seen Senpai—and I hadn't seen anyone else from our school either.

"Aren't you supposed to go around in groups when you're on the class trip? How come you're out here eating desserts by yourself?"

"Today's our free day. Everyone gets to pick individually where they wanna go."

“And you decided to come eat dessert...”

Otoi-san was holding an ice cream glass filled with a matcha parfait. She picked up a big spoonful of green ice cream and fancy-looking mochi and fruits, and pushed it into her mouth, chewing blissfully while remaining expressionless. You couldn't get much more touristy than that without a camera, some sunglasses, and maybe a Hawaiian shirt.

“Whaddabout you? Don'tcha have school? Can't believe you're skippin'.”

“It makes you sound a billion times less strict when you're lecturing me with cream on your mouth.” I sighed, before launching into an explanation: that Mashiro-senpai's mom, Mizuki-san, was a star overseas and was letting me come with her to Kyoto for her work, which was also why I was skipping school. I also explained that she'd figured out I was the voice actress for *Koyagi*, and that she seemed to be supportive of me.

“This mochi's great.”

“Were you even listening?”

“Up till the part I realized you'd be just as annoying in Hollywood as y'are at home.”

“This is Kyoto, not Hollywood!”

“Look, the whole explanation thing is really boring. You tune out at those parts in anime too, right?”

“I do, but this isn't an anime.”

As always, I was stuck pointing out the obvious to her.

Then, I spotted Mizuki-san approaching us. “Hey, Iroha-chan! You can't go away like this!”

“Ah! Sorry! I'll come back right away!”

“Is this your friend of school? Were you getting closer?” Mizuki-san glanced at Otoi-san.

I told her during our chat last night that the second-years were on their class trip right now. I *did* think that if we ran into Senpai he could fill her in on that, but I didn't feel like leaving it to chance would be very *efficient*. As you can see, I take after him!

“I guess she's my friend, yeah; she's my senpai. She's a sound engineer who helps out with the recording for *Koyagi*.”

“Oh, I see. She is a keyman. Important person. A shadow supporter. I can feel she is very talented.”

Otoi-san laughed. “You're a blast, ma'am. Feels to me like you're pretty talented yourself.”

“I don't think you should point at her like that,” I said. “She's an adult...”

Something felt a little strange about this. It was like Otoi-san didn't really *like* Mizuki-san too much. Maybe it was just my

imagination.

“Can I ask y’somethin’? To commemorate our meetin’ ’n’ all.”

She *really* wasn’t going to speak to Mizuki-san with any respect, was she?! I mean, I kind of didn’t expect anything different from Otoi-san of all people, but still!

“Oui. Ask me anything, please. I will ask any question without concealing. I am bare for you. I am worst at giving a lie, being false.”

“You’re an actress. Lying is basically your job,” Otoi-san pointed out. “Nyway. Is it true you spotted Kohinata’s talent?”

“An actress’s quality is what an actress understands best. Do you have a room for doubt?”

“N’ you said you wanted to cultivate Kohinata’s talent yourself, right?”

“I see she has no cultivating at home. She was very poor, and it’s a waste, so I took her over. It’s no more, and it’s no less than that.”

Otoi-san’s eyebrow jumped up. Otoi-san was rarely expressive, so it stood out; it sounded like something Mizuki-san had said made her really mad.



“I get that her environment’s not great...but y’know I’m a sound director, right? I can give her voice trainin’ to a certain extent myself.”

“Oh, there is that side to a voice actor’s world too? That has logic to it.”

“Y’know, there are tons of cases of successful people thinkin’ they can pass down their individual talents to just anyone, so they give all this messed up guidance that ends up ruinin’ their students. ‘N’ I don’t want Kohinata pickin’ up bad habits just ‘cause some first-rate actress had some spare time on her hands.”

What the heck were these sparks?! And how was I supposed to put them out?!

These two were fighting over me—but wasn’t this usually the kind of fight that happened between two guys? Why were these girls having a standoff over this? Thank God Murasaki Shikibu-sensei wasn’t here, or I’d be wrapped up in another of her 3D yuri ships!

I was still panicking when somebody from the crew shouted over to us in English.

“Hurry up! It’s time to start!”

“*Fuck!*” Mizuki-san replied with a gentle smile that said “I’ll be right there.”

There seemed to be a total disconnect between her words, her expression, and her tone, but that was probably just down to my less-than-perfect English.

“Your name was Otoi-san? I want to show you with Iroha-chan. How is that?”

“Hey, yeah! You should totally come with us, Otoi-san!” I didn’t waste any time in accepting Mizuki-san’s offer on Otoi-san’s behalf. I liked both of them; I didn’t want them to stay at odds with each other. Also, this was kinda pathetic of me, but I’d feel way better with someone I knew well, rather than being by myself in this world where everyone was speaking English.

I gave Otoi-san my best-ever puppy dog eyes, while she scratched awkwardly at her cheek and mulled it over. Then, she scooped up everything that was left in her parfait glass—the mochi, the fruit, the cream—and stuffed it all together into her mouth.

“I guess I could learn somethin’, seein’ a professional set. I’ll come along.”

“Yes!”

“Uh, it was Mizuki-san, yeah? Thanks for the opportunity, I guess.”

“Yes. Otoi-san, it will be good. Please enjoy it.”

I was relieved to see them treat each other with a semblance of

respect. Their first impression of each other might've been bad, but they'd probably figure things out after spending some time together, right? They *were* both adults. Well, Otoi-san was a teenager, but her mental age was way higher.

"Oh, that's right." Mizuki-san turned to Otoi-san. "You are a young girl. I want to call you friendly. With your first name and -chan."

"Aaah!"

"Oh? I am surprised by your strange, abrupt yell. What has happened, Iroha-chan?"

"You can't ask Otoi-san what her first name is! You'll trigger her!"

"Why? Calling her first name is an honor; a proof of a friend. I don't think it's an embarrassing thing. Or is there a possibility the first name is embarrassing?"

Otoi-san wasn't saying anything—and it was terrifying! This was literally the top entry on her list of things that made her mad! Were these two fated to just never get along?!

"Hmm, girls of age are difficult. You are the same difficulty level with Mashiro. It's mysterious where the triggers are; you never know. Then, now I will call you Otoi-san. Please, can I?"

"Yeah. 'Sokay for now."

"Oui. I understood. Now, let's go."

"R-Right!"

I could hear from the last sentence's change in tone that Mizuki-san had switched modes. Her expression was that of an actress—this was work now. She was no longer the mysterious beauty who seemed to know more than she let on; she was someone else—though it was hard to describe exactly who. Usually, I'd say she'd put on another mask, but it was more like something had come out from within her and was now clearly visible on her face.

That change in her expression got me to focus again as I followed her to the film crew.

Being on set was a stressful experience. There weren't just actors; the director, assistant directors, recording crew, lighting, and so on... Countless professionals all getting on with their work, shooting cut by meticulous cut without a smile to be seen.

The long takes were especially hard to watch, and I wasn't even part of the crew. They had to start all over every single time an actor messed up a line or broke character, adding at least another ten minutes to the whole process. As an aspiring actress myself, I could imagine perfectly how those actors felt after making a mistake, and it was enough to get my knees shaking.

Mizuki-san's part came during a musical number. A group of actresses dressed as geisha gave a Broadway-level performance, singing and dancing against Kyoto's traditional townscape. It must've been a nightmare doing all that dancing in geta sandals, but their steps were light and they made it look like a total cakewalk. The way their kimono sleeves fluttered with their movements couldn't be more perfectly suited to the big screen.

"Wow..." I gaped, completely transfixed by Mizuki-san's stunning performance. It was hard to believe she was the same woman who spoke like she was born yesterday.

I wanted to be able to express myself like she did. I wanted to be a colorful part of the movie's world and, there on the stage and in front of the cameras, put everything I had into becoming my character. That one desire was growing bigger and bigger inside my heart. I was so glad I'd come here to be able to see this! There was so much going on here I'd never have picked up on by just going to see the movie when it was complete. For example...

"I never knew they sang the musical parts while they were shooting. I always thought they added the song in post."

"Snot like that. They barely ever use the singin' from the actual shoot."

"Wait, really?" I turned to Otoi-san in surprise.

The Suckie stick in her mouth bounced up and down as she explained. "Y'get a ton of background noise when you record people singin' in the open like this. It's easy enough to get rid of with today's technology, but yeah, you'll still get better quality adding the song back in post, like y'said."

"So they're singing even though the audio's not gonna get used?"

"Lip-synching's hard. Could *you* lip-synch a whole song perfectly, right to the end?"

"Y'know, now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure I'd suck at that."

"Right? It's tough knowin' how you're s'posed to move your mouth without makin' the sound that goes with it. Could prolly pull it off if you got the practice in, but what'd be the point if you could get the same results just by singin'?"

"Huh. That makes perfect sense."

Otoi-san never failed to impress me. She could talk for ages when it came to sound-related technique, and that was only the start of what she had hidden up her sleeve.

"I'm also surprised at how they're *not* using CGI in the parts I'd expect them to. Like when they're running up building walls like ninjas or jumping down from two stories high. And, like, I'm watching the actors *do* that right in front of me, but I still can't believe what I'm

seeing.”

“Yeah, not as much stuff is left to the computers as you might think, even now. I think they still destroy a ton of cars for car chase scenes and make all these explosions with pyrotechnics for war movies, which the actors have then gotta run through.”

“Jeez, that’s rough! They’re literally risking those actors’ lives, huh?! I guess it’s time to start training using live explosives!”

“They usually use stunt doubles to do the stuff that’s *actually* dangerous, though. I’ve heard it’s pretty easy to get a gig in Hollywood if you can pull off those kinda scenes too. All ’bout havin’ skills no one else does. Not that I’d know.”

Wait, so was there anything Otoi-san *didn’t* know about movies? I knew about her interest in sound, but I didn’t know she was so knowledgeable about the *other* aspects of the acting world.

Otoi-san’s lollipop stick came to an abrupt stop when it was pointing up into the air, like she’d noticed I was amazed at her insight. “Well, y’know. When you’re studyin’ up on music in entertainment, y’gotta brush up on your general knowledge about the industry too. Otherwise you’re gonna end up stuck at some point.”

“So *that’s* how you know all this stuff.”

“Yup.”

Not only did I now understand, I respected her for it. She always walked around like she was laziness incarnate, but when it came to sound, she was as serious as could be.

It didn’t do much for her friendliness, though. She had a list of seemingly random trigger words, and she could be inflexible and scary at times. Stuff that came together to make her seem kind of aloof to the average person. To me, though, she was on the same level as Senpai. She was like an older sister; someone I wanted to stick with my whole life.

“Chick’s impressive.”

“Mizuki-san?”

“Yeah. Don’t like that she’s taken you from your mom, but I gotta respect her actin’ skills.”

“She hasn’t ‘taken me’ from mom. You’re making it sound way worse than it is.” It wasn’t like you couldn’t have more than one mother figure in your life either.

Too bad the same couldn’t be said for lovers! Urgh! I was *dying* to know what Senpai and Mashiro-senpai were up to right now—but for the moment, I needed to set aside my worldly desires and focus on Mizuki-san’s work going on in front of me.

“She’s normally a Broadway actress, right?” Otoi-san said. “So doin’ movies would be, like, a side gig for her?”

“Yeah, but they’re both acting jobs.”

“Sure, but when you’re on a different stage, you gotta use a different set of actin’ skills. The way you captivate the audience ’n’ how you present yourself changes too.”

“You’re right...”

My hunch had always been that it didn’t really matter *where* you were; it was enough just to get into character. After hearing Otoi-san put it into words, though, I realized she was right: the stage you were acting on mattered more than I’d thought. When I took part in the National Drama Fair, I’d relied completely on my experience of voice acting in Otoi-san’s studio—but maybe I’d used the wrong approach back then. It had worked well enough for acting at high school level, but if I wanted to go further—go professional—I wasn’t confident it would be enough.

“It’s not just her actin’ skills either. Her radiance is on another level too.”

“What d’you mean by ‘radiance’?” I asked.

“Like her charm; the way she draws the audience’s eyes and keeps them on herself.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, ’cause she’s super pretty.”

“Snot ’bout bein’ pretty.”

“Huh?”

Wasn’t it?

I mean, sure, there was way more to acting than looks, but when it came to which actors shone the brightest, had the most impact, and seemed the most charismatic, the answer was usually “the better-looking ones.”

“Y’don’t gotta be pretty to be radiant. It’s more like...the depth of your character, or your individuality. Like, the lastin’ impression you leave on the people watchin’.”

“I kinda get what you’re saying. Then again, I kinda don’t...”

“If y’dunno how to appeal to people—in the way only *you* can—your radiance is gonna fizzle out the second you try out a different kind of actin’ to the one you’re used to. You must’ve seen that happen before, right? Like when a popular TV celebrity starts streamin’ online, ’n’ suddenly they’re as interestin’ as cardboard.”

“Oh my God, I literally can’t stand that kinda thing. It’s way too cringe! Can we talk about something else?”

“Yeah, like there was this one comedian about five years ago who was so bad. Then there’s the way they start every video in that standard beggin’ way, like: ‘Welcome to my channel, please subscribe and hit that like—’”

“*Can we talk about something else?! I’m gonna die of cringe over here!*”

She seriously needed to stop right now. What if someone heard

her bad-mouthing these former TV celebs, saw me with her, and banned me from appearing on TV forever?! What would she do then?

“Nyway, my point is, Mizuki-san is just as impressive when she’s shootin’ a movie,” Otoi-san continued, ignoring my panic and letting a sigh pass around the lollipop stick in her mouth. “If that wasn’t a natural gift, but somethin’ she’d learned over loadsa time, then *maybe* it would be a good idea if you became her student.”

“Her student...” Even saying the word out loud didn’t make it sound real. I guess I shouldn’t have expected it to; this was a Broadway actress we were talking about. I still found it hard to believe I even had a connection to her in the first place.

“Voice actin’s your main gig. Followin’ after her might teach ya somethin’ ’bout any side gigs y’might be interested in, like drama or movies. ’N’ I guess if she’s as helpful as y’say, there’s nothin’ wrong with acceptin’ that help. Still doesn’t mean I gotta like it.”

“Yeah... If I’m serious about my dream, I can’t...”

...waste this opportunity.

I had to observe this professional film set up close. Observe how Mizuki-san captivated the audience. I knew full well how valuable and rare this chance was. I knew how big this wide world was. And how complex.

“I’ve made up my mind,” I said.

I didn’t specify what about. Otoi-san already knew.

“Yeah. You’ve made the right choice. I think.”

“Thanks for all your hard work, fellas!”

“Catch ya at the next location, folks!”

It was just past midday when the morning filming came to an end. The crew quickly set to work dismantling the set—I guess they only had permission to film in Gion till a certain time—and then started preparing to head for the next location.

Since I was a part of Mizuki-san’s group, I stuck with her manager and helped her team load up the big van we’d be taking to the next spot. I was there partly as her “assistant,” so I was getting involved in a lot of odd jobs like that.

Then there was Otoi-san, who was doing nothing to help and didn’t even bother to look guilty about it. Though I guess that was fine; she was on her class trip, and I was the one who dragged her out here.

I was sitting in the back of the van when Mizuki-san came to sit down on my left (Otoi-san was on my right, if you’re wondering).

“Thank vous. Carrying the luggage saves me a lot.”

“Not at all! I’m used to helping out like this. Comes with having a

bunch of senpais!" I flexed my bicep at her. "Besides, you've given me a really valuable opportunity. This is the least I can do to show my thanks."

Mizuki-san giggled. "Nice smile. It shows your happiness. I become happy too."

"Ehe he he!" I laughed bashfully at her kind words. And I realized if I was going to tell her my decision, it had to be now. I took a few deep breaths to steady my breathing, then turned to look Mizuki-san right in the eye. "Um, I wanted to talk about becoming your pupil..."

"Your face shows determination. You have decided on your mind, yes?"

"Yes." I nodded confidently. I was grateful for Mizuki-san's offer to take me on as her pupil, but it wasn't right. It wasn't an offer that would give her what *she* wanted. It was all about me, about fulfilling my dream. I couldn't rely on *her* extending a hand to *me*.

"I want to ask you this properly. I want you to keep me close as you work—so that I can see all of your acting techniques up close, and steal them!"

There.

I said it.

I'd made a choice that had the potential to change my entire life. If this were a video game, I'd probably just have locked myself into a certain ending. Only, I didn't get the chance to save. This was all or nothing, and I'd just decided to go for it.

Mizuki-san didn't say anything for a while. I had my head bowed, so I couldn't see her expression but, unless I was imagining it, I could feel her gaze boring into the top of my skull.

"How was my form when I worked?"

"Oh, um..." Her question came so suddenly that at first I didn't have the words to respond. My silence only lasted a second, though—the most honest response is always the first that comes to mind. "You were amazing."

"What places were amazing?"

"For example, you delivered even the most simple lines in a way that was so captivating...and in the musical scene, I always found myself watching you, even among the hundred or so other actors and dancers. If I were watching the movie and the camera was focusing on you, it'd make sense, but there was no camera. It was just a natural thing. It was like you were the brightest source of light, the brightest star. Normally, I think of you as like, the moon, but when you're acting you're more like the sun, or—"

"Oh. You talk, don't you?"

"Ah! U-Um, sorry, I guess thinking that about you is kinda rude..."

Mizuki-san brought a hand to her lips and let out a refined giggle.

I shrunk back in embarrassment, reminded of Murasaki Shikibu-sensei when she started rambling about her anime or games or whatever. That Mizuki-san was amazing was simply a fact. She didn't need an amateur like me to tell her. So why had I been so enthusiastic about telling her how great she was?

"Very pure and innocent. It is good, wonderful. But I have to ask one more question in another direction. You are saying I am amazing. Is that really your only thought about me?"

I hesitated. "No."

It was like she was seeing right through me, down to the very last layer. When I watched Mizuki-san perform, I felt more than just respect and admiration. She was free, up on that stage. Totally free to express herself. Free from whatever anyone else thought of her, and she used that freedom to shine.

"I'm jealous. That's...the word that's popping up in my head, but I can't really explain why."

"You are full of confidence, self-conceited, and competitive."

"What?! What makes you say that?"

"These things are resembling being jealous too. These emotions are only born when it's for a person you can reach to."

"O-Oh, I see! It's incredibly arrogant of me to be jealous of a super talented actress like you. I'm sorry!" I thrust my head downward, like the good kouhai I was. My face felt like it was going to explode from heat as I realized how presumptuous I'd been. "W-Will you forgive me?"

"Forgive? Non. You are having a misunderstanding."

"Eep!"

Oh my God, she was totally about to make me disappear forever, wasn't she?! Fear made the blood drain from my face, and I trembled as Mizuki-san turned her sharp, assassin-like gaze on me.

"I do not forgive or anything. You passed!" she announced joyfully, a gentle smile spreading across her face.

"Huh?"

"There are lots of actresses and people with talent. Only the spiteful ones with deep jealousy can win a violent bloody war and reach the top. I am thinking that, so..." Her hand, white as snow (I know it's not an imaginative way of describing them, but they literally *were* that white), caressed my cheek. Usually I hated people touching my face and I'd duck away, but for some reason I actually wanted to lean *into* Mizuki-san's touch. "So, I tested you a little bit. If you weren't suited for being an actress, I am sorry, but I make the talk of being my pupil not happen."

Was she for real? That invitation to become her pupil was a secret *test*?! That was way too sneaky! Was this what I'd have to deal with in

the adult—no, in the *professional* world?

“But, it’s okay. You will go ahead, no matter what. Like the Olympics.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

“Iroha-chan, my determination is firmed up to teach you. I say yes to you. No to drugs.”

“I kinda feel like that last part was unnecessary. Why are you trying to bring such a dangerous topic into this?”

“I have only one worry. Before you’re my pupil, we discuss your determination. We cut to the core, to see if you sell your soul.”

“Like I said, you *do* realize how dangerous you’re making this all sound... Ah...” I stopped myself midway. This wasn’t the time to be messing about. I needed to show her I was serious about this.

Mizuki-san seemed to be friends with mom. When Mizuki-san first asked me to be her pupil, she spoke like she knew what kind of relationship I had with mom. I didn’t really know much about mom’s past, so I didn’t know anything about her connection to Mizuki-san either.

All I knew was, from the way they acted around each other, their relationship went back pretty far. So, by showing me how to become an actress without breathing a word to her, Mizuki-san was in effect betraying my mom.

Maybe I need to tell her—tell mom—I wanna go into acting...

“Putting off the conclusion. It’s a bad Japanese habit. But I think it is good to be careful. I like it. I respect it.”

“Trust me, I know I’m indecisive...” I whimpered.

Mizuki-san giggled. “A troubled young person becomes strong like they were troubled. But time limits, time bombs, explode. You will lose your time to think at the next destination. You have the possibility. The potential.”

“Um, I have no idea what you’re saying...”

“We will see a sign. Stupidly big and loud advert. For our next destination.”

“Oh, Tenchido...Eternaland...” Outside the car window, there was a sign facing the road. “W-Wait, *this* is our destination?!”

“Yes. There is a filming here. Is there a problem?”

“Ungh, um... Er...” I tried to say something, but it felt like my mouth was stuffed with cotton balls.

Mom was CEO of Tenchido. The only reason I was able to come out here without asking was because mom was away from home, working at the head office. Which meant she might be *here*.

“U-Um, the CEO doesn’t come to the theme park directly, right?” Again, Mizuki-san giggled. “Who can say?”

In my mind, a CEO of a major company did one of two things:

either they were in their jet flying around all over the place, or they were sitting back in their huge chair. This theme park might have been under the direct management of Tenchido, but I doubted the CEO would do anything like inspect it personally.

I hoped not, at least. The big grin on Mizuki-san's face had me worried I might be missing something, though, and my heart was beating erratically. I put my hands together and sent a desperate plea upward that I wouldn't run into mom there.

Otoi-san, who was sitting on my other side, stirred. "Mmnh..." She yawned. "Somethin' wrong, Kohinata?" She must've been sleeping—she yawned again as she frowned at me questioningly.

"Apparently, we're going to Tenchido Eternaland," I said.

"Nice, sounds fun. How come you're not smilin'?"

"I'm worried the CEO might show up and make things awkward."

Otoi-san laughed. "Nice gag. Who even cares what the CEO's up to?"

"What? Oh, uh... No one, I guess."

Oh yeah. Otoi-san didn't know that Amachi Otoha, CEO of Tenchido, was also *Kohinata* Otoha. Which made perfect sense, because I had only found out myself recently.

"Anyways, why the heck would the CEO bother comin' to the theme park?"

"You didn't have to ask, Otoi-san. You've probably just jinxed it."

"C'mon, you're not really that superstitious, are ya? No such thing as a jinx."

"I-I guess not! Aha ha! Ha ha ha ha!" Otoi-san's optimism had me laughing too.

"I'm actually pretty hyped to be goin' to Eternaland. I've heard good things 'bout their pancake sandwiches and fruit cream soda. Always wanted to try 'em." There was a tiny tinge of happiness in Otoi-san's drawl. The only times the otherwise mature Otoi-san showed glimpses she was a cute, teenage girl like myself were when she talked about sweet treats.

Anyway, it looked like I'd missed out on my chance to explain to her my mom was the CEO of Tenchido. I bet if I'd told her, she'd have asked to leave things here so she could protect me. Even if the chances of actually running into mom were close to zero, Otoi-san wouldn't take that chance, and would instead grab my hand and pull me out of this van to safety, even if it meant taking a rain check on visiting her beloved Tenchido Eternaland.

Now that I'd seen how eager Otoi-san was to visit the theme park, I didn't want to put a damper on things. I'd already made her come all this way with me when she was supposed to be enjoying her class trip. The least I could do was make sure she had the chance to eat the

desserts she longed for.

Nothing was going to happen. I wouldn't run into mom; I'd study the film set, have a little fun, and head back home.

Time to change gears!

"Otoi-san!"

"Hm?"

"Let's have fun at Eternaland, okay?"

"You got hyped quick. What, was it the pancake sandwich that caught your interest?"

"Yes, siree! I'm gonna Hoover up all the desserts I can find!"

"Let's do it!" Otoi-san joined me in raising an excited fist.

I knew I was being a bit over the top in both my movements and my volume, but the positivity gave my mind a good boost. Mizuki-san watched us both with a tender smile on her face.

Right, we were in Kyoto, and this professional actress was letting me shadow her on set. That was *huge*, and this might be the only time in my life I got an opportunity like this. I couldn't waste it by worrying; I had to have as much fun as possible!

...

Though this'd be way more fun if Senpai were with me...

Interlude: Namako and Canary

As a popular superstar editor, I, Kiraboshi Kanaria, started my mornings off early. I lived in the city, in a luxury high-rise apartment building. It was nestled between IT businesses that kept Japan up and running.

My apartment building had a total of fifty-two floors—and I was right at the top. I got up from the double bed—more than large enough for its lone owner—and allowed myself to bask in the morning sun that shone through the window.

It was seven in the morning; four hours after I'd retired for the night.

What do you mean, I don't get enough sleep, chirp? I've been able to fly on this little sleep since I was still a fledgling in my second year of junior high. It just so happens that my body doesn't *need* it that much. Oh, but it's *so* important to get enough sleep, so don't you good little chicks start copying me!

I washed my face as swiftly as possible, put on some sportswear, then left my apartment with a tote bag stuffed with towels and other items. I used the elevator to get down to the third floor. This floor had a mail desk, manned by a concierge, and a communal fitness gym. It was part of my morning routine to break a quick sweat here before heading to the office.

To be perfectly honest with you, I had gotten sick of looking down at the city's nightscape from my apartment within three days of moving there. The elevator took an age to get to me, and earthquakes, blackouts, and plumbing problems were a total pain. I wanted to get out of here and move into a tiny little house, or even a hotel or something—it'd be way easier. The one thing stopping me was this gym.

It was a massive plus for me to have a place I could exercise at a stone's throw away. It was safe too; the security was top-notch. When you are an idol *and* an editor, you get a lot of rabid fans as well as a lot of rabid haters. So you can see why I might need a nest that doesn't allow random people to get too close to me.

Once I had my body and mind primed, I took a shower, then stared myself down in the mirror while I applied my makeup. What, you think I'm pretty enough without makeup? Then you're missing the point. It's the way of a first-class idol not just to rely on her natural

beauty, but to keep polishing herself up without fail. This is something amateurs need to keep their beaks shut about! And anyone who dares make a peep about my “real age” is gonna get clawed, chirp!

There I go, getting off track!

A good editor knows when to redirect a tangent back to the main point.

With my morning routine winding down, I filled up on some yogurt and supplements for breakfast, then set off for the office. I drove; I couldn’t bear the thought of being crammed into one of those commuter trains like a pack of swaying sardines. That’s also one of the reasons I decided to live so close to my office—and I’m not exaggerating.

I arrived at work just a teensy bit after ten. Things were laid back enough here that nobody would comment. *I* was one of the early ones, actually. Some people didn’t show up till the afternoon.

Opening the door with my card, I stepped into the editor’s office with a wide smile. I wasn’t Kiraboshi Kanaria anymore; I was Canary! A girl whose professional smile could charm bosses, coworkers, juniors, authors, and clients alike!

Let’s smash it again today, chirp!

The second I walked into the office, a sudden round of applause made my smile waver.

Did I walk up on a stage by accident?

Just kidding. I wasn’t stupid enough to actually think that. If I’d been onstage, the applause would be louder, and there’d be cheering added to the mix. The applause I received in the editor’s office was more like the pitter-patter of light rainfall, and the “crowd” was much smaller. But you know when you’re expecting nothing, and then *something* happens? It freaks you out, right?

“Congratulations!”

“Sir? Um... What...”

“Congratulations!” The editor-in-chief didn’t answer my question. He just kept repeating “congratulations” while smiling and clapping at me.

A spiked crew cut and stern, chiseled features. His solid pecs were prominent even under the wine-red shirt that covered them. This was the editor-in-chief—the boss of UZA Bunko, where I worked. You’ve heard of crunch time when it comes to deadlines, haven’t you? With this guy, you’d be forgiven for thinking it involved the physical crunching of bones. And yet he was here, smiling and clapping for me. It was totally weird.

“Congratulations!”

“Congratulations!”

“Congratulations!”

The other editors, and even the part-timers, were applauding me too, like they were trying to recreate that one scene from that masterpiece anime. They were even circling me—well, it was actually more like a semicircle—so I bet they were doing it on purpose.

“Th-Thank you?” I asked.

““Thank you”? You’re breaking character. Remember, you’re an idol.”

“Really? *That’s* your response?” I could sue him for professional harassment for that, couldn’t I? Speaking of professionalism, I was able to keep the thought to myself. “So, what’s this all about?”

“Your anime! Congratulations on getting the anime confirmed, Canary-kun.”

“Oh, is that all? One of my series got an anime offer? Surely that doesn’t warrant all of this, does it?”

Not to brag, but every series I’d ever edited had scored an additional print run. Most of them had offers from anime companies too, so one more on top of that wasn’t a huge deal. Of course it would be cause for celebration for *most* people in this line of work—but not me!

“What are you talking about? You worked hard for this, didn’t you? You were always complaining that the author wouldn’t agree to it.”

“Wouldn’t... Huh?” I blinked exactly three times, then put my genius mind to work figuring out what the editor-in-chief meant.

I got more anime offers than you could shake a feather at, but there was only one author among my series stubborn enough to reject every last one. Their work sold like hotcakes even without an anime, so I’d half given up—but that didn’t stop me from negotiating behind closed doors.

“Are you talking about Makigai Namako-sensei?”

“That’s right. He’s given his permission for an anime adaptation, hasn’t he? Honeyplace Works contacted me to talk about the rights, and I found out right away. I can’t believe you kept all of this to yourself! You should have told me the moment you made even the tiniest bit of headway with Makigai-sensei!” The editor-in-chief laughed.

“...Huh?”

Wait, what? It was the first I’d heard of any of that!

“You certainly kept *me* on my toes! Here’s this newcomer, recent winner of a major prize, and you just weren’t getting him to budge on the whole anime thing. At any rate, I’m glad you’re finally getting somewhere!” He laughed again, like he didn’t have a care in the world.

“...Please excuse me.” I slipped past the editor-in-chief and rushed

over to my desk.

Most of the editors' desks here were scattered with manuscript drafts, light novel proofs, figures, CDs, and other miscellaneous items. But there was one that was so conspicuously tidy and clean, you'd think it had never been used. It was, of course, the prestigious desk belonging to superstar editor Kiraboshi Kanaria.

When you are a top-tier editor like me, it's only natural to keep your work environment— Wait, I've got more important things to worry about!

Quick as a flash, I turned on my PC and opened up my emails. It just wasn't possible that one of my works would get an anime *without me knowing it!* I checked the avalanche of emails that had come in since I last looked one by one—there was a possibility that everyone else in the office might be experiencing a mass hallucination.

"N-No way...chirp."

It turned out I didn't actually need to check them all individually; there were an abnormal number of emails mentioning *Snow White's Revenge Classroom* in their subject lines. Some were internal, like the emails from the rights department or the editor-in-chief. Others were external: like the producer from the main music label I'd been negotiating with in secret, or the companies hoping to make merchandise for the series.

The most important, however, came from Tsukinomori Makoto of Honeyplace Works. This deal was already set in stone, and all without me having a say.

Mashiro's given her approval for the anime to go ahead. Of course, we'll be the studio that takes it on. Cheers to our new eve of working closely together.

"He seriously tried to toast me over email?! Gaaah! Uh, chirp." I neutralized my guttural scream with an adorable chirp. Did it *save* my outburst? Not really; it was more an extra top-up of character, for when I was about to slip up. It was an emergency measure with a ton of different uses!

Anyway, if we ignored Tsukinomori-san's unprofessional, nauseating tone, that left the contents—and that was where the real problem was.

That problem was called Mashiro: Tsukinomori Mashiro, pen name Makigai Namako. Author of *Snow White's Revenge Classroom*. Assuming this email was right, she'd given permission for an anime adaptation to go ahead. Without asking me.

"Ma. Ki. Gai. Sen. Sei," I growled through gritted teeth as my trembling fingers flew over my phone screen. I found Makigai Namako-sensei's contact and started a call. I knew she was still on her class trip, and I had planned to leave her be while she was away, but

this was an emergency of the most urgent kind.

The ring tone sounded a few times before it was suddenly interrupted.

"Hello? Oh, it's you, Canary-san."

"Don't 'oh, it's you' me, chirp! I can't believe you went ahead and green-lit the anime without even a cheep!"

"Oh, yeah. You don't have to worry about that."

"I think I do, actually!"

"What? But you're super talented."

"I mean, I'm not *not* talented! If you can find me another editor as talented as me anywhere in the world, I'll keep my eye on them and then bring them into my flock, chirp."

"Take care of it for me then? Shouldn't be hard for someone like you."

"What? Your logic is all wrong, chirp! You *do* realize you're throwing me into the wind turbines here? At least tell me you've put *some* thought into a plan?"

"Wait, you're saying you're in trouble because of how sudden this all is? And you haven't had time to prepare?"

"You got it! Look, your work is being handled by a publisher now, and that means it's no longer *just* yours. Being the author doesn't mean you can go around handing out rights like candy!"

"But you're so talented. I'm sure you'll be able to deal with it."

"Yeah, you're right, but that's not the issue! I'm just asking that you treat me with a teensy bit of respect, okay?"

"But it's so much effort..."

"How rude! Listen, Makigai-sensei, don't think you can just treat me however you want!"

"Eh, I sure can. Think of it like a tax on your talent."

"Excuse me?!"

I was already giving my all to this industry—why did I have to pay a *tax* on top of that?!

And what was with Makigai-sensei's attitude? Her work was getting an anime, and she was talking like she couldn't care less!



But maybe that wasn't so weird. She had never shown interest in expanding her work to more media, so maybe she was one of those authors for whom an anime adaptation was no big deal. There was something to her tone, though—it was likely she was preoccupied with something.

“Oh, I gotta go. I’ve got something important going on. I’m gonna hang up.”

“What? What on earth could be more important than discussing the anime adaptation of your work right now?”

“I’m gonna hang up.”

“Makigai-sensei?! Hey! I’m not done— Makigai-sensei! Makigai-sensei?!”

Click.

My pleas were banished by a sudden, merciless silence. Of course, I wasn't about to stop there. I rang her back, again and again. Sent LIME message after LIME message like a crazed stalker. The calls kept coming back with “Sorry, I’m not able to take your call right now. Please leave a—” Well, you know how it goes. And my LIME messages weren't even left on read.

I bet she'd switched her phone off.

She really expected me to just deal with this somehow?! I guess I did tell her to let me take care of all the parts that weren't writing. I probably should've had some more foresight, huh?!

“Are you all right? You didn't get in a fight or anything, did you?”

“Eep! O-Of course not, chirp, chirp! I'd never ever get in a scuffle with one of my authors, chirp, chirp, chirp!”

“I'm a bit concerned with how much you're chirping, but I don't have any reason to disbelieve you. So I won't.”

“Ha ha ha ha!” I laughed like a lively kookaburra to ease the editor-in-chief's worries. Or maybe a crow would've been a better simile; I was being a bit sneaky. It wasn't especially reassuring that our boss was so gullible, but at least that easy nature of his meant he didn't interfere too much. “Ha ha! By the way, sir, *Snow White's Revenge Classroom* is getting an anime.”

“Yes, I know.”

“That means we're likely to get a *lot* more inquiries—so I was wondering how far you've gotten with those new hires?”

“Hm? What makes you think we're hiring?”

“What?! I thought I asked you to get me a team that I could delegate inquiries to?”

“You did, but I know how brilliant you are. You still seem a long way from burning out.”

“Even the fastest gears smash when you push them too hard,

chirp!”

The editor-in-chief laughed. “Wouldn’t a quip about breaking eggs be more appropriate?”

“The reasonable thing to do would have been to respond to my point, not comment on my metaphor! I’m seriously *this close* to losing it!”

“It looks to me like you’ve already lost it.” The editor-in-chief paused. “And I do have a reason for holding off on those hires.”

“Please let me hear it.”

“I’m sure you know that hiring people is expensive. If I went ahead and took on more employees, but you never managed to get an anime for *Snow White*, it would have been a complete waste of money.”

“Even without *Snow White*, I’ve got so much on my plate right now it’s a wonder I haven’t died from overwork yet.”

“But you’re not dead.”

“Which is why I’ve told you, again and again, to *please* get me a team, before the breakdown comes and it’s too late.”

“You’re fine. You’ve still got enough energy to do all your idol stuff.”

“Gaaah! This is why the publishing industry is never gonna change!” I cried out from the depths of my heart.

Now, I was a working adult, and I was more than fully aware that my coworkers weren’t slackers, as much as I knew that the editor-in-chief also put everything he had into his duties. But I needed him to understand that my idol activities weren’t just a hobby or a bit of fun on the side; they were a marketing strategy that I’d developed for myself. I knew that was probably an impossible ask from someone of the older generation.

As an idol, it was important to make it look like you were fully enjoying yourself in front of your fans, and not let them see the business side of things too much. That also had the disadvantage of making it hard for businesspeople to take you seriously. Sigh.

“Okay, I’m done grouching for now, chirp!” I wiped my eyes and decided it was time to switch gears.

Brooding over things that couldn’t be changed was a waste of time; I was Canary-chan, workaholic, and my strongest attribute was the ability to bounce back from adversity with my nerves of steel. I was a bird who could spread her wings into the stormiest of skies, and make it safely to my destination!

“*Snow White’s Revenge Classroom* is getting an anime! And I’m gonna make sure it’s a success, chirp!”

Chapter 2: My Friend's Mom is the Secret Final Boss!

Say you're making a stop in the village before a game's last dungeon, talk to some kid, and then it turns out that *he's* actually the final boss. How would you feel?

"I was hoping there'd be a bit more fanfare before the final fight."

"If I'd known, I would've leveled up more. That'd be way too harsh for people who are going in blind!"

"What a total circle jerk from the developers. Their whole focus should be on what's best for the players."

Most people would probably have one of the reactions above, or something close to it.

Surprise is a good spice to add to a game, but you shouldn't add more than a teaspoonful, and you certainly shouldn't use it for anything more than adding some aroma. In cooking, spices are used to enhance the delicious flavors that are already there; if you use too much and ruin those flavors, then you shouldn't have added anything in the first place.

Sticking to the classics is usually the best way forward. The final boss is especially important to get right, because that's often what players will remember. You need to fine-tune their emotional reaction and give them plenty of time to prepare before that climactic fight.

"Welcome to Tenchido Eternaland! My, my, aren't you such a sweet little couple? Tee hee!"

And here we see a perfect example of how to completely miss the mark.

CEO of Tenchido, Amachi Otoha. Mother to my friend's little sister, Kohinata Iroha, and the main reason she wasn't allowed to be open about her voice acting work. Otoha-san was further along the path I was taking in life, and in some ways my greatest enemy. We had completely different philosophies about how to manage our creative teams, and I was determined to one day get the results that would prove to her that I was in the right.

Otoha-san was someone I needed to best in several ways; she was very much like a final boss. And now here she was. There had been no warning whatsoever. She just *stood* there, right in front of the Tenchido Eternaland entrance.

The gate was surrounded by statues of characters which, despite

being marketed for kids, held a dignity all of their own, thanks to their historical significance. They were grand, cutesy, and gorgeous all at once.

And it didn't matter at all, because Otoha-san was waiting to greet Mashiro and me in the least satisfying final boss encounter of all time. If you're ever planning to make a game, take this as an example of what *not* to do. Don't be that desperate, please.

So yeah.

"Hey, Mashiro. Can we get outta here and go level up a bit?"

"Wait." Mashiro grabbed my shoulder while I was in the process of turning around. Her grip was stronger than I expected. Guess she'd bulked up.

"Don't run; it makes you seem so unkind! You wouldn't want to make me cry, would you?" Otoha-san said, purposely making her voice wobble, but making no other effort to fake cry.

"At least get some eye drops so you can make it look like you're actually crying." I couldn't muster up an ounce of pity; she was definitely messing with me.

She had the teary intonation down pat. Combined with the rest of her performance, it was really unnerving. I'd prefer she picked just one: be either good or bad at acting, not both.

"What are you doing here, Otoha-san?" I asked.

"Why, I'm Tenchido's CEO, of course I'd be here! You could say I'm the general manager."

"I don't doubt that, but that doesn't mean you actually have to come here in person, right?"

"You two are my very special guests. It would be rude of me to send a mere representative to come and welcome you now, wouldn't it?"

"Special guests?" I echoed.

"Otoha-san invited me here," Mashiro explained. "She's prepared us a place where we can spend some time, just the two of us."

"She did, huh? Since when did you two get so close?"

"Remember when we had that party? The one after you announced *Koyagi's* hiatus? That's when."

"Oh, right."

Otoha-san and Mizuki-san had both shown up to that, so I guess she and Mashiro got to talking while I wasn't paying attention.

Why, though?

Mashiro was Otoha-san's daughter's friend—I got that. But do moms really form private relationships with their children's friends like this, without said child's involvement?

For example, what if my mom formed a friendship of her own with one of my friends? Uh, I guess it'd help if I actually had more

than one friend in the first place. Great, now I'm depressed.

I knew paranoia wasn't a good look, but this was Otoha-san we were dealing with. I couldn't help but feel she had some ulterior motive for getting in touch with Mashiro. I guess if nothing else, I now knew why Mashiro was so eager to come to Eternaland today.

Unlike when I'd come across her in our apartment building, Otoha-san was dressed up in a suit, and in full-on career mode. It reminded me of Sumire in teacher mode, except Otoha-san's garb seemed more luxurious. I wasn't an expert on designer brands, but I couldn't see anyone else wearing a suit like that except a politician or a CEO like her. But like I said, I couldn't be sure. That was just the impression I got.

Otoha-san gave us a smile that was too friendly for the outfit she was wearing while she held out a pair of lanyards with tags, right in front of her ample, suit-clad chest. "And that is why I, CEO of Tenchido, rushed over as soon as I could, to give you darlings these free one-day passes personally. Isn't that so thoughtful of me? You can say it! Don't be shy!"

"Free?" I asked. "Uh, wait, you mean we don't have to pay for them?"

"Of course not! You're on a date with my daughter's dear friend, not to mention you're my son's best friend too. As their mommy, it's the *least* I could do!"

"G-Got it." I shot a glance at Otoha-san's face. The bright smile on it concealed any ulterior motives she might have had. It wasn't like there were any holes in her explanation, but I couldn't pin down what the *point* was to all of this. Surely Tenchido's CEO of all people had better things to do than facilitate a date between Mashiro and me? And that was before you got to the bit where Otoha-san abhorred entertainment in all its forms. Would someone like that *really* gift us the chance to spend time at an establishment that specifically glorified such things?

I couldn't help but think she had to be cooking up some sort of plot.

Thinking back, I *did* remember her excitable reaction to seeing that photo Mashiro took of me at the Drama Fair. She'd thought it "adorable" how "super-duper" in love the photographer was with me. Could it be that she just wanted to support Mashiro in her feelings for me? I guess it *was* possible...

"Tenchido Eternaland—that's TEL for short!—isn't just a theme park using elements and characters from Tenchido's many franchises," Otoha-san said, "it also serves as a museum documenting the company's history! As the leader of a development team, and a young boy whose starry dreams are pulling him towards this industry, I'm

sure there will be plenty of learning opportunities for you here too!”

“You’re saying this fits in with the class trip, then?”

“Exactly!”

Kyoto’s history wasn’t all traditional temples and ancient townscapes. As a company born in Kyoto and that later gained fame worldwide, Tenchido and its development was a part of that history too. If today were to end up in my report on the class trip, I was sure I’d be able to write a pretty serious piece on Tenchido Eternaland. It was also bound to inspire the 05th Floor Alliance’s improvement, now that we were moving on to console games.

Two birds, one stone. The epitome of efficiency.

This might not be such a bad deal after all.

“Here you go, sweetie!” Otoha-san said, placing one of the lanyards over my neck.

“Th-Thank you.”

She moved on to Mashiro. “And one for you too, Mashiro-chan! Here you go!”

“Thank...you...”

The smile on Otoha-san’s face and the cheerful bounce in her movements reminded me of my own mom for some reason. It felt a lot like when I started kindergarten and elementary school, when I got the lanyard with my name tag hung around my neck. She probably wasn’t doing it on purpose, but Otoha-san had this natural motherliness about her that made me feel like I was a kid again. And if a relative stranger like me felt this way, it must have been a hundred times worse for Iroha; it was no wonder she hated being treated like a kid.

“Okay, and now that’s all done for you...” Otoha-san studied the passes around our necks with a satisfied gleam to her eye, and then gave a deliberate cough. Her eyes, which she usually kept narrowed, flew open wide.

“Purby, purby, purby, welcome to the kingdom of dreams! Welcome to Eternaland! This is a place where everyone can let out their inner child! A land where you never have to grow old! It’s full of wonderful, adorable friends who are all waiting to meet you!”

...

Okay?

What the hell was that voice she was putting on? Was I actually experiencing this right now, or was I watching an educational kids’ show on NHK?

That would make sense, because I’d never heard anyone reach those high notes apart from those singing ladies on one of those shows—except now I had, in real life no less, and unless I was dreaming or hallucinating (and I didn’t think I was), it had come from the woman

right in front of me: mother of two, Otoha-san.

She'd sounded so cute—and young. What was going on?

Maybe she was naturally gifted in the vocal cord region, just like her daughter and the Alliance's voice actress, Iroha.

Mashiro and I were so bewildered, we couldn't move until Otoha-san placed a hand on both our backs and ushered us towards the entrance. "Come now, sweeties! Set forth on your journey into dreamland!"

"W-Wait, you're just making things more embarrassing! Please stop pushing!" Mashiro squirmed, her cheeks red.

"I-I can walk fine without being pushed, thanks!"

But she was strong, slapping at our writhing backs like a sumo wrestler, and forcing us closer and closer towards the front gate. Seeing our passes, the attendant welcomed us through the open gate with a smile.

"Purby, purby, purby!" the attendant trilled in the exact same tone as Otoha-san. "We have two very special guests here to explore the kingdom of dreams!"

"This *isn't* actually the headquarters to some weird cult, is it?!"

The attendant looked completely normal and was stylishly dressed—so maybe I *was* hallucinating?

If I were, at least Mashiro was on the same wavelength; her face was pale to start with, but now it was turning even whiter. "Y'know, I've seen this kind of setup in horror movies..."

"Don't say that. Theme parks make for some of the scariest ones!"

"I *like* horror, but...yeah, there's something really culty about this place." Mashiro shivered.

Otoha-san and the attendant waved at us and, not really knowing what else to do, we waved back as we hurried on into the park.

I couldn't say the place had given a great first impression, but whatever—we were here now, in Eternaland, ready for our date (at least, I think that's what it was) to start.

Though it was the middle of a weekday, Tenchido Eternaland was completely packed. There was a group of girls walking along, eating huge pancake sandwiches and drinking cream sodas. Probably college students with flexible schedules. There were also several groups of what were probably foreign tourists, using up some of their vacation time.

I also saw a few families with kids who were the right age to be in school—I was more confused about them being here than anybody else. They couldn't be taking their education seriously if they were out here skipping school to come to Eternaland. Oops, my Japanese

conformist nature is showing...

None of those kids were that old, though—junior high age at most—so they probably couldn't see the value in education just yet. I could understand why they might want to play truant. I still thought it was dumb to risk your grades over a trip to a theme park, though. An honor student would never dream of doing such a thing, nor would someone pretending to be an honor student—like Iroha. Obviously Midori, the most serious girl I knew, wouldn't either.

What about Mashiro, then?

I glanced at the face of my childhood friend as I walked next to her. She was looking at the pamphlet a costumed character at the entrance had given her, her expression serious as she considered our next move.

Mashiro used to be a shut-in. I doubted she'd feel any actual guilt in skipping school at this point, but since then, she'd plucked up the courage to step outside. She no longer needed me as her boyfriend-slash-protector. With how she'd grown, I didn't think she'd ditch school anymore without a *very* good reason.

I suddenly realized I'd been staring a hole into her this entire time, something that she was bound to notice if I kept it up. It wouldn't do to let myself be captivated *too* much.

"Wanna go here first?" Mashiro asked, hesitant, pointing at a section of the pamphlet.

"The *Hyper Marco* attraction? Looks good to me."

"He's Tenchido's flagship character. That's why I think that's the best place to start."

"Let's do it, then."

"Yeah."

It was a surprisingly unsentimental first pick coming from her. I would have expected a girl to go for that FPS where the characters battle over territory while dressed in fashion from various subcultures, or the fitness adventure where you have to manipulate the ring controller; something along those lines.

Instead, she made a choice that displayed her deep respect towards one of Japan's leading game developers. Her face looked like she was a soldier setting out beyond the city walls to face a race of rampant, giant men instead of a girl facing a day of fun at the theme park. It impressed me, but I also wasn't surprised. This was the aspiring writer who was being trained by a top-tier editor, not just some average Jane who didn't know the hard work that went into creating.

We arrived at the area the pamphlet called "Hyper Marco Mountain" and were greeted by a long line. An attendant held up a

sign informing us that there was a one-hour wait for a general seat. A whole damn *hour*.

Just as I was despairing at the prospect of so much wasted time, I felt a tug on my sleeve.

“Let’s go, Aki.”

“Seriously?”

It was the mighty Mashiro, who cowered not in the face of such a lengthy line. Daunted by her courage, and without the dating experience needed to suggest we go somewhere else first, I let her lead me by the sleeve to the end of the line.

Ugh, I could hardly think of a less efficient use of time.

“Eek!”

I suddenly heard a stifled scream and when I looked, I saw that one half of the couple in front of us had turned to look at Mashiro and me. Her eyes were as wide as if she’d seen a ghost.

The heck is her problem?

Was it because Mashiro was clearly out of my league in the looks department? Well, she didn’t have to scream about it. Stuff like that hits hard.

“What’s the matter? Why are you— Gaaah!” This time her boyfriend turned around and it was his turn to scream. Except *he* didn’t hold back.

The people in front of them then turned to look with a “Gyaah!” and the people in front of *them* gave us an “Ooorgh!” while the people in front of *them* full on “Aaaaargh”d at us, like a chain reaction of terror.

Wait, wait, wait, wait, something was up. This just wasn’t normal.

“Aki? What’s going on?” Mashiro looked up at me, anxious.

“Damned if I know.”

The only thing I could think to do was to casually step in front of Mashiro so that she was protected from the inexplicable stares.

“L-Look, there’s an attendant coming this way.”

“Yeah... Don’t worry, we’ve done nothing wrong. I’m sure he’ll understand if we just act like we’re not intimidated.”

I guess he must’ve noticed the crowd acting weird. The attendant was walking around enthusiastically with his sleeves rolled up, clearly eager to do away with any troublemakers. But the second he stepped out in front of us, his eyes seemed to jump out of his skull, turned bloodshot with a single blink, and his teeth started chattering. His body was shaking like he’d downed a poison whose effects were instantaneous. I was surprised he wasn’t foaming at the mouth by this point, actually. Then, with a shaking finger, he pointed right at us...

No, not at us—at the passes that hung around our necks.

“I-Is that an LVIP pass?! They really exist?!”

More murmurs, stronger than before, rippled through the line.
“LVIP?”

“No... You mean the legends are true?”

“What?! But no one’s ever seen one of those passes before!”

I tried to gather as much intel as I could from the snippets of conversation I picked up, but none of it was enough to explain the situation fully. It’d be nice if someone could give us some details but, unlike manga, you couldn’t always count on there being someone with you at all times to hand out exposition.

Though maybe there *were* exceptions.

“A-Are those LVIP—short for Legendary VIP—passes?!” A long-haired man, covered from head to toe in pin badges featuring Tenchido characters, eagerly wiggled his glasses up and down as he spoke.

Ah yes, the famed nerd who looked like he knew everything there was to know about Tenchido. He was sure to launch into an explanation for us, spoken at a rate faster than your average human.

“Tenchido Eternaland sells three different types of annual passes that get you perks above ordinary tickets. The first is the light pass, which allows the holder to ride a small selection of rides for free, and can only be used on certain days. The second is the middle pass—it’s *like* the light pass, but it’s good for more rides and more days. The third is the VIP pass, a pass that grants access to every single available perk. Those are the passes available to the general public—us—but there actually exists a pass that sits a level higher. A legendary pass that everyone and his dog yearns for! That’s the LVIP pass. Its issuing requires the CEO’s permission, and the holder can skip the line for any attraction, boarding it via a special LVIP entrance. You will be given special treatment, and—”

Got it.

He was still talking at an amazing speed, but I’d already heard everything I needed to, so I zoned out. Thanks, nerdy stranger.

The point was, this was a pass that granted us huge benefits.

“I-I-I’m so sorry for not recognizing that you were LVIPs!”

Flustered, the attendant bowed his head to us. At some point, his rolled-up sleeves had been smoothed down so they were covering his wrists again, completely crease-free. With all the courtesy of an elderly butler who had been serving us, his wealthy masters, for many years, he gestured for us to step away from the line. “Please, this way!”

“Thank you, Jeeves.” Mashiro was quick to raise her chin by an inch and allow the attendant to treat her like a princess as she stepped forward with a smug smile on her face.

You’re getting way too into this, Mashiro.

And that was how Mashiro and I walked straight past the regular line and got into the attraction via the deserted LVIP entrance. In no time at all, we were already boarding the coaster, printed with pictures of Marco himself.

“Huh,” I said. “I thought roller coasters usually had a bunch of restraints and stuff.”

“I guess it’s ’cause this isn’t exactly a roller coaster; they call it an ‘experience,’ where the goal is to just enjoy the world around you.”

“Oh, right. Makes sense, since it’s aimed at kids. And just because it looks like a roller coaster doesn’t mean it’s been built to go as fast as possible.”

“Yeah. Look at those 3D images too. They look so clean!”

Our conversation might have been a little too sterile for a high school couple—but that was just how we spoke with each other. The whole time, I kept my eyes glued to Mashiro’s face.

I couldn’t help it. So much of this just didn’t make sense. What was she thinking? What was her objective in all of this?

Why did she suddenly put an end to our fake relationship? Had her feelings for me changed at all? If they had, why did she choose to spend our free day together?

I thought she might be planning something for when we arrived at TEL, but so far she’d shown no signs of doing anything out of the ordinary. If anything, she had stuck closer to me when we went to the summer festival together. Now, it was like she was keeping at least a step’s distance between us; enough space for a whole other person to fit into. Maybe it was only natural: genuineness aside, we weren’t in a relationship anymore.

“Wow, look at the quality and detail they’ve put into this production! That’s Tenchido for you.”

An enemy in the shape of a mustache came jumping out from the screen, right at us. It felt so real, but Mashiro didn’t even flinch; she observed the character head-on, unblinking.

The ride seemed to reach its end in the blink of an eye. I’d been so focused on Mashiro the whole time, I barely remembered any of it. My lack of reactions must’ve bored her too—once we got off the ride, she went straight to looking at her phone with a serious expression, not even smiling once.

Well, this is awkward...

I hadn’t realized how overwhelming it could be to spend time with a member of the opposite sex until I’d become aware of what being in love was actually like.

What was she thinking? What did she think of *me*?

My brain was paralyzed as it drowned in a mire of superfluous emotions, struggling to connect one thought to another. Was there

anything less efficient than this?

I was pretty sure the answer was no.

“We’ll go here next.”

“Huh?”

“Why are you spacing out?” Mashiro snapped. “I’m talking about the ride we’re going on next. This one: Gorilla Kong’s Jungle.”

“O-Oh, oh, right! Yeah, let’s go!”

“Let’s hurry.” Mashiro scampered off, phone and pamphlet in hand.

Not wanting to be left behind, I hurried after her.

After that, we continued to explore TEL and checked out a range of attractions. When we walked, we stayed at a quick pace and took the most efficient routes possible. Thanks to our legendary passes, we didn’t have to wait in a single line. That meant that, though our time at the park was limited, we still got to experience a good number of attractions.

In case you were wondering, Mashiro took total charge of the whole thing.

I was usually the one showing people how to be efficient, but this time Mashiro was taking care of absolutely everything. I was such a mess today it was almost laughable, and my brain didn’t seem capable of thinking too hard about anything. All I could do was let Mashiro dictate where we were going and what we were doing.

At this rate I was just going to embarrass myself. I knew I needed to get it together, but the whole day I was completely distracted by Mashiro, and I could barely form a coherent thought. It was like I was floating through the clouds; I couldn’t focus properly on anything.

And then there was her attitude today. I just couldn’t figure it out.

Though she seemed eager to ride as many attractions as possible, at no point did she look like she was actually having fun. When we were between rides, she didn’t share any thoughts on them. She didn’t speak to me at all, in fact—she just looked at her phone, typing away with a frown on her face. It genuinely felt like she wasn’t enjoying her time with me whatsoever.

I knew I wasn’t her (fake) boyfriend anymore, but this was still supposed to be a date. What kind of guy would I be if I let my date partner be bored? I wanted to do something so she’d enjoy this, but I couldn’t come up with anything.

Pathetic, right? If only I could get a hint.

Suddenly, a distressing sound like a dinosaur getting strangled reverberated through the air.

Mashiro’s head snapped up from her phone, and she looked at me.

“Did you hear that?”

I threw out a verbal smoke bomb. “H-Hear...what?”

Yeah, it was a little unfair. I hadn’t exactly answered her question, and I’d avoided outright lying at the same time.

With the way Mashiro had one hand over her stomach, it was clear as day what that sound was.

“Wanna get something to eat over there?” I offered.

“So you *did* hear! Urgh!” Mashiro groaned, her face red.

I didn’t know what she was getting so embarrassed about. It was perfectly normal for a human being’s stomach to growl when they were hungry.

I guess I *did* understand what it was like for someone to see you in a state you didn’t want them to see you in. Like how I hated how pathetic I was being, unable to properly take charge of our date like I was supposed to. I didn’t want anybody to see me like this either.

Thanks to Mashiro being cute as usual—or rather, her being a little vulnerable—I felt myself relax slightly. This could be my chance to show some consideration.

“There’s a stand over there. Wanna go for it?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t wanna fill up here if I can help it.”

“O...kay?”

What was with the stubbornness?

I thought for a moment, trying to figure it out.

If she was hungry, the natural thing to do would be to eat. She’d eaten from stalls at the summer festival, and we’d been out to eat at a restaurant before, so I knew she didn’t have anything against eating on dates in general.

Maybe she thought we should skip eating because it’d take away from the time we had to go on more rides. No, that wouldn’t make sense. There were food stands here with items you couldn’t eat anywhere else, so if she wanted to enjoy this park to its fullest, having some of the food should be a part of that experience.

What other possibilities are there? Think, Akiteru!

“Jeez, did you see that old hag? She was taking *forever* to fix her makeup!”

“I know, right? At that age, you’d think she’d realize there’s no point anymore!”

Please, random college students, I’m trying to think over here!

And why did those girls who just passed us think it was okay to bad-mouth strangers? It was distracting. If nothing else, I’d appreciate it if they could keep their voices down.

Okay, I was trying to figure out why Mashiro doesn’t want to eat anything...and I’ve already ruled out two possibilities...

“Youngsters these days! The time they take in those stalls, you’d think they’re trying to live in there!”

“I couldn’t agree more. I don’t know whether they’re constipated or using their phones, but either way, they ought to consider other people, especially when the line’s that long!”

Please, random middle-aged women, I’m trying to think over here!

And again with the bad-mouthing! Though I guess it was normal for every generation to complain about each other.

It was only now I realized both groups had been complaining about the other’s bathroom habits. I looked up to see where all these passersby were coming from, and yep, it was the bathroom. It was a cutesy building with statues of Tenchido characters outside, but it was clearly labeled as a toilet and had the typical male and female symbols.

“Ah!”

That was when it hit me.

Foot traffic into the men’s bathroom was low, but there was a huge line for the ladies. The bathroom actually seemed more popular than any of the attractions we’d been to today. Naturally the people in that line needed to go more urgently too, and there was a sense of impatience rippling down the whole thing as they waited moment by moment to see if *finally* they could take another step forward.

With that, the mystery was solved.

“I got it! The lines for female bathrooms are usually long already, and TEL attracts more female customers than male. If you ate something and suddenly had to go, you’d be in trouble—and that’s why you don’t wanna eat! Well, Mashiro? Did I get it?”

Silence.

I didn’t notice.

“Whew, I feel so much better having figured that out. It gets stressful grappling with a mystery, y’know.”

Silence.

I didn’t notice.

“But we don’t want you getting so hungry you collapse either. You should eat—and go to the bathroom—if you need to. It’s only healthy. I don’t think it’s a great idea to hold it in just ‘cause you don’t wanna wait for the bathroom.”

“Aki.”

“Don’t worry, Mashiro. I’m fine waiting, even if you take ages. So let’s go grab something to eat, okay?”

“Aki. Shut up a sec.”

“Hm? Oh, okay.”

I was on a roll. Clearly I got overexcited. But that excitement had now hit rock bottom.

Wait, I knew what this was.

It was a classic case of a man rattling on and not realizing how insensitive he was being.

“I’m sorry.”

I apologized the second I noticed.

Mashiro sighed, as though moved by my honesty. “Looks like you get it,” she said, letting it go without any fuss. Her cheeks were still puffed up, but she looked more endeared if anything—though I was a little hesitant to take it that way. “I’ll be honest, I’m kinda curious about the pancake sandwiches. But yeah, sacrifices have to be made...so I’m sorry for making a big deal out of not eating.”

“Pancake sandwiches?”

“Yeah. They’re a famous dessert you can only buy here. They’re especially popular with girls.”

“Huh. That sounds like something even Otoi-san’d crack a smile for.”

I bet she wouldn’t even have spared a single thought about the line for the bathroom before diving into those sandwiches. Now that I thought about it, I’d seen Otoi-san eat hundreds of times, but I’d never once seen her going into a bathroom—even when Iroha’s recording sessions ran long and we needed to take a break.

This was Otoi-san we were talking about, though. Her facial expression barely changed, which often reminded me of a robot. If she were to tell me she didn’t have the physical capacity to use the bathroom, I’d fully believe her. Unless she had a sensitive side and thought it would be unladylike to go to the bathroom while I was around?

No. Nope. No way, Jose. Any other girl, maybe. Not Otoi-san.

“Let’s go, then. C’mon.” Mashiro took my hand and began to lead me in the opposite direction from the tempting food stands.

“Right, right.”

The famed TEL pancake sandwiches shifted farther and farther out of sight.

Hold on, today was the free day for our class trip—and that meant Otoi-san was free to do whatever she wanted today too. Maybe if we *had* gone to get pancakes, we might’ve run into her.

“...Nah.” I laughed it off.

“Are you laughing to yourself? Ew.”

“If you could kindly keep the disparaging remarks to yourself, it would be most appreciated, Mashiro-san.”

I mean, I *knew* it was weird to laugh to yourself, but that didn’t make her comment hurt any less.

In the end, Mashiro and I headed for the next attraction, leaving me with no way of proving the existence of Schrödinger’s Otoi-san.

“Aki was totally on to something there! If he *had* gone to get pancakes, he would’ve encountered a wild Otoi-san having some herself, along with a cream soda! Those are some sharp instincts he’s got!”

“You still here, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei?”

“Sure am! What’s wrong with that? It’s not like I’ve got a part in the actual story!”

“This is a space for me and Aki to chill together, and you’re getting in the way. For how much you like to ship us, you sure know how to tear us apart.”

“Wh— HNNNGH! I wanna be involved! But I don’t wanna get between you... What... What am I supposed to dooo?!”

“How about nothing?”



Sasairo (2)



...



Iroha

Kyoto is SO much fun! :D



Iroha

Shout out to these 5-story pagodas!!!!



Iroha

This Hollywood shoot is SO good LMAO



Iroha

I just rolled up to Tenchido Eternaland! Yeah Boi!!!



Iroha

You totally wanna be here too, right? Right?



Iroha

I'm so generous, I can send you some pics if you want.



Iroha

Wanna see them? I know you do!



Iroha

Why are you leaving me on read? Aren't you excited?!



Iroha

Oh, right! You're in class!



Iroha

Oopsie! ^^;



Iroha

Sowwysowwysowwysowwy!!!



Iroha

Btw, I'm having this pancake sandwich right now here in KYOTO, are you sure you don't wanna have some?!



Iroha

Ooh, it's so yummy and sticky and sweet!



Iroha

I don't think you can get it where we live, so I'm gonna send you a photo that makes it look super tasty. You'll have to make do with that.



Sasara

OMGGG SHUT UP ALREADY!!!!



Sasara

I got rid of you by sending you out to Kyoto, and you're STILL finding ways to annoy me?!

Interlude: What Midori Saw

Nobody in this world is born evil. It's their environment that turns them bad.

Those words may seem profound, but in fact they came—quite naturally—into existence in the mind of Kageishi Midori—that is, me. Reason being, at this moment, I knew just how it felt to be bad. Really bad.

“Can you believe Midori-san let us do this? I thought she'd shoot down the idea for sure!”

“Yeah. Goddess of rules. Free day? No fun. That's Midori-san.”

I could hear my fellow drama club members having an amicable conversation. As for the source of their surprise, it was all around us.

Chattering, cheering, and chuckling swirled between the costumes of the famous game characters around us as the costumed actors gave lighthearted performances for the crowds. In this lively space overflowing with hopes and dreams, it was as though the rich tapestry that was life had been reduced to merely the parts that embodied fun.

“Tenchido Eternaland.” I murmured this place's name. Among the bright colors, I could feel a darkened aura radiating from me, deepening my shadow. “Everybody's right. I don't belong in a place like this. I'm far too serious for amusement parks. It must seem so absurd to everybody that I came here in a poorly disguised, desperate attempt to cheer myself up and let loose.” I gave a hollow laugh.

“M-Midori-san? C'mon, cut it out!”

“Smile! *Smile!*”

This was the day of our class trip on which we were permitted to go wherever we liked. We weren't required to keep to our groups or even our classes, and so I had decided from the very start that I would venture out with the other members of the drama club. It was a decision I had made long before Ooboshi-kun had rejected me.

The choice of destination was a different matter. I had agreed to come here as a direct result of his rejection.

Originally, I had intended to visit historically and culturally significant places today. There were still plenty of such places and temples in Kyoto we had yet to see. However, after what had happened, I was very much in the mood to cut loose and have a good time (not *that* kind of good time; a pure and *wholesome* good time). That was why, when the club members started to clamor about

visiting Tenchido Eternaland, I joined them on the bandwagon.

"This is the end for me, and I've come to accept that. So I may as well surrender and act without an ounce of restraint!"

"Midori-san's been overcome with her whole lifetime's worth of rebellion! Till it runs out, she's gonna be transformed into the world's worst delinquent!"

"I dunno what happened, but let's treat her nicely today, okay?"

Yamada-san was a kind, level-headed girl. Even if I broke down completely, I knew the drama club would continue to function as long as she was around. I was grateful to know that I didn't have anything to worry about and could safely continue my demise.

"Where should we go first?"

"It's hard to pick, huh? Everywhere looks so fun!"

While I observed everybody animatedly discussing which attraction we should visit, I felt a small sense of relief within me: that things were...normal.

My heart had been ravaged by my romantic affections, and for a short time, those feelings had sent me to a far-off land. There, any hope I had for those feelings being returned had been torn apart, and I had made my way back to reality. A reality where absolutely nothing had changed. It was immensely reassuring.

Personally, I wasn't concerned about where we went. Thrill rides, haunted mansions—it was all the same to me. I was with the people I wanted to be with... That was the most precious thing to me right now. It was like a jewel, and the choice of attraction was simply a choice between polishing that jewel with a file, a drill, or a diamond. Ergo, it was completely trivial.

Leaving the decision-making to everybody else, I stared off into the distance. My consciousness itself had no say in the direction of my gaze; it was as though my body had moved on its own.

So why, then, did that glance lead me to catch sight of that particular couple?

"Ooboshi-kun and...Tsukinomori-san?" I found myself whispering their names. When I realized, I swiveled around to look at the club members, but fortunately they were still engrossed in their discussions of where to go, and it seemed that they hadn't heard me.

I casually positioned myself behind everybody else so that I wouldn't be seen, and kept my eye on the couple who disturbed me. I was under no illusion that I still had a chance with Ooboshi-kun; that wasn't why I was doing this. I was simply curious about who he had picked over me.

Surprisingly, Tsukinomori-san seemed to be taking charge of their date. There was determination in her step as she studied the pamphlet in her hand. She was barely looking in Ooboshi-kun's direction; her

interest seemed to be focused only on the sights and scenes around them. Ooboshi-kun did nothing more than follow her like a faithful dog, and they looked much more like a pretentious princess and her servant rather than an actual couple.

But it was enough. Enough for me to know for sure.

“Ooboshi-kun can’t keep his eyes off her...”

Was it attraction or something else? I had no way of knowing why his gaze was stuck to her like glue. All I knew for certain was that every last one of Ooboshi-kun’s thoughts and feelings were being dominated by Tsukinomori-san in that moment.

Ooboshi-kun was in love with Tsukinomori Mashiro. I was sure that was the case. And how could I be wrong? I was the girl who got a perfect score in every test in every subject. The girl capable of solving every problem I came across.

“Man, we’re never gonna come to an agreement. Midori-san, where do you wanna go?” Yamada-san’s sudden question captured my attention. I imagined it was partly because they genuinely couldn’t decide, and partly because she was trying to be considerate. I decided to take advantage of her kindness.

“I want a drink,” I replied.

“Huh?”

“I want to drink enough to forget everything. To drown in it. I want a drink.”

Those words came out of me perfectly naturally. How curious.

Now, obviously, I’ve never had any alcohol myself. I just knew of the drinking culture among adults; that it helped to relieve stress. And I learned that much through novels and movies.

Hence, it was no wonder my brain had identified my current state as one which could be solved by alcohol, and yet I was struck by how quickly it had come to that decision when I’d never had an ounce of drink in my life. It was as though it was borne of something transcribed into my very DNA. That, or a trick of my imagination.

“U-Um, you know we can’t drink.”

“I know you’re going through a period of intense rebellious feelings, but that’s no excuse for underage drinking.”

“Inescapable firestorm. The acting upon of a single misguided impulse. It can forever hang overhead.”

“I’ve looked this up: about eighty percent of recent celebrity controversies online have been linked to their underage drinking, know what I’m thinking?”

I gave them a sharp look in response. Did they really think I was capable of such a thing?

“Of course I didn’t mean an *alcoholic* drink. Who do you think I am?”

“Oh, so you’re still sticking to the law.”

“I guess Midori-san will always be Midori-san, even when she’s going through a period of intense rebellious feelings.”

“And why shouldn’t I be? Rebellion is no excuse for criminal activity!”

The tension in the air dissipated. I took in the relieved expressions that lay on the club members’ faces, then pointed decisively into the distance towards one of the theme park’s restaurants. A bright green sign stood in front displaying a photo of a cream soda. It was a tasteful advertisement, supported by Tenchido’s colorful characters and presenting the popping of the soda bubbles as explosions. It was an excellent way to promote soda’s extreme, mind-numbing mouthfeel perfectly.

If I can just get my expressions straight... Yes, a soda was just the thing to hype us up after a sesh chilling out with the gang. Now try and tell me I’m not a delinquent.

“Great idea, Midori-san! I’ve heard good things about the cream soda here.”

“Perfect information, perfect answer. Welcome to Midopedia, the free encyclopedia.”

My answer seemed to have impressed the girls, even though it was based on nothing but what my soul was crying out for.

I suppose it didn’t matter, as long as they were happy.

Interlude: Iroha, Mizuki, and Otoi-san 2

KRAWW!

The monstrous bird's screech pierced the sky, heralding the rumble of thunder, and opening up the darkness with the screams of humanity.

A small walk away from the kingdom of dreams, where jovial music played and costumed characters frolicked with children, there was a tunnel. Past that tunnel lurked a huge, eerie building, standing beneath a sky tinted gray with burning smoke on even the brightest of days.

This was Tenchido's Ghost Mansion.

The walls of the four-story building were covered in cracks and ivy, and there was a message written in dense, bloodied English telling the reader to "Go to HELL." The mansion's only purpose seemed to be to keep people out, and it was enough even for someone like me—Kohinata Iroha—to be overtaken by terror.

Okay, maybe not quite terror, but this place sure was confusing me.

Think about it from my perspective. I'd just been in the fun world of TEL. All I'd done was go through some tunnel, and now I was in some kind of horror movie. It was enough to give anyone whiplash. Who the heck thought *this* was a good idea?

"This is way too different to the rest of the park!" I said. "And what's with the spooky music that showed up outta nowhere? This place makes no thematic sense!"

Otoi-san launched into an explanation. "They clearly put a lotta thought into where they placed each speaker. If you'd noticed the sudden change in background music, it'd break the immersion. This is a world of dreams; y'don't want a reminder that it's all made by human hands. The techniques they've used to subtly loop the music 'n' change it 'n' stuff mean the audience don't even notice." And all that with a mouthful of pancake. She bought that pancake sandwich from the stand we were at just before we came here. After that matcha parfait she had in Gion, I was starting to worry she'd overeat and give herself a tummy ache.

"I-I see. That's fine for the music, but the atmosphere's so different here, I think anybody'd notice." This place was almost *too* scary for a

haunted house. If it were up to me, I probably would've toned it down a little.

"Sall 'bout loyalty to the game world, I guess. Everyone says the Ghost Mansion series is way different to the other games Tenchido makes. Stems from the chaotic time way back when the gaming industry was still young."

"As a haunted house, it is famous, picked up by the media, and collects attention." Mizuki-san added her piece to Otoi-san's extensive explanation. "Especially the acting of the monsters. The actors and realisticness are very amazing, on the level of top actors. They scooped the talk of how it made everything as scary as possible."

"Huh..."

Everyone around me knew so much more than I did. I was starting to feel like I was a video game protagonist. You know how it is: when the main character knows just as much as the player does, it makes for better immersion, and it's easier to teach them the controls and the lore. In a setup like that, the side characters naturally become much more knowledgeable than they'd be otherwise. *That* was how I felt right now.

Oh, and it was Senpai who taught me that little game dev technique by the way! Tee hee!

Even if I didn't know as much about TEL as these two, at least I could gain the mental upper hand by remembering what Senpai taught me.

"Are you going to be filming inside this house today?" I asked.

"Oui. More introduction of Japanese culture. Many of the ghost actors are taking a part."

"Wait, you can get a gig in a Hollywood movie just by playing monsters in a haunted house? Are you serious?"

"But they are extras. Cast of the theme park, only unborn actors. Everything can collect attention and bless you with opportunities."

"Pour everything you can into your work, and one day your talent will be discovered," I said. "That sure is a romantic way of looking at things."

Mizuki-san giggled, then passed me a warning. "Iroha-chan, I think that is a good, correct answer. But it is wrong that everyone is aiming at a big job like in Hollywood. They are maybe satisfied with their work now, and do this because it is worthy. In the end, this is only a result. It is the filming group who wants to rely on them, and use them."

Right. Not everyone had the same huge ambition I did, and a haunted house was probably the last place you'd look for work if you wanted to end up in the movies. Thinking back, I was "discovered" by Mizuki-san thanks to my voice work for *Koyagi: When They Cry*. But

the purpose of my voice acting wasn't so that I could get scouted by a huge Broadway star, or anyone else for that matter. I did that work because I loved it, because it was fun, and because Senpai wanted me to. I gave my all to my work, but everything that came my way after that was nothing more than coincidence.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I guess I got a little overexcited because of how incredible this set is." I let out an awkward laugh.

"No, it was an honest response. Normal and natural. It was cute, so I love it."

"Wait a sec..." Otoi-san murmured.

"Oh. Otoi-san, something became your attention?"

"I was just thinkin', there were a lotta park visitors still wanderin' round for somewhere that's 'bout to be used for filmin'. Looked like they were still comin' in too."

She was right. At the moment, we were with the film crew by the mansion's rear entrance, but we'd seen people out the front lining up for the attraction on the way in. We could hear screams from visitors inside the mansion even now, like this place was open for business as usual and just as popular as ever.

"Oh. That was right. It is wrong that the filming is from now. After the park is closing, the people are deleted, then it is filming."

"Deleted... Um, I think you mean 'after the people have left.'"

Deleted in this context sounded super unnerving. You wanna know something even more unnerving? It was sometimes hard to tell when Mizuki-san was being serious, and when she was just making mistakes in her Japanese.

"At this time, we come to the meeting before the filming. And, the recording of the documentary is finished first. It is a professional plan, and efficient."

"So they're not waiting till filming is finished to wrap up the documentary?"

"It's time and situation. Time is money. Workers are busy. There's a necessary thing to find the gaps, and fill them."

"I thought 'time is money' was supposed to mean something deeper than that. But I get what you mean."

It was something I'd never thought about just watching movies before, but of course there were times on set when there wasn't any actual filming going on. It reminded me of my work on *Koyagi*—I'd recorded a few lines of "thank you for x downloads!" filling in with numbers up to ten million. Those were all done ahead of time. A professional film set probably employed similar tactics as we did, only they did it on a much bigger scale.

"Huh... Don't that mean you don't actually hafta be here then?"

Otoi-san pointed out.

“Oh! Your sense is a sharp knife. Noticing too much, stabbing hard. Blood everywhere. Be careful when you walk at night.”

Otoi-san laughed. “Your Japanese’s taken a dark turn. That’s hilarious.”

“You call that hilarious? I call it dangerous!” I cried.

Mizuki-san was *terrifying*. Otoi-san too. I had no idea how she could just laugh off what Mizuki-san said.

Actually, these two were giving off such bad vibes that it was making *me* fade into the background, something that literally never happens! That’s gotta be, like, against the law or something!

“Yes, I am an actress. And I am different to the leading one. It should not be that I am here, normally.”

“I’m guessin’ y’came here just to show Kohinata the set, then?”

“Yes. I want to bring Iroha-chan. Only this.”

“Gotcha,” Otoi-san said, finishing off her pancake and starting to slurp on the straw in her cream soda.

Now I was *really* worried.

“Um, Otoi-san? Are you sure it’s okay for you to be eating that much?”

“Why?”

“Well, um, I saw the line for the bathrooms earlier, and they’re super long. If you start needing to pee—”

“Aaand triggered.”

“*Huh?!?*”

I was just sharing my concern for her comfort. What could be so triggering about that?!

“Y’haven’t said anythin’ wrong in ages. I thought I finally had y’ttrained.” Otoi-san sighed.

“You can’t train someone if you literally don’t share *any* information with them. You’re asking the impossible!”

She laughed this time. “Well, I’m still not gonna explain. Just try not to trigger me.”

“That’s totally unfair!”

“Oh, you are doing a fun-seeming game. I want you to mix me in too.”

“This isn’t a game. Otoi-san’s telling me I need to avoid her triggers, but she *won’t* tell me what they actually are.”

“Triggers... These are something not to say, or not to touch. Is that right?”

“No comment.” Otoi-san completely dodged the question.

But it looked like Mizuki-san’s curiosity was piqued. Showing no signs of backing down, she instead put a hand to her chin like a detective in thought. Then, she clapped her hands together as an idea

struck.

“The trigger word is bathroom. This relates to your first name.”

I blinked.

“GAAAAAAAAAARGH!”

Otoi-san *screamed* with so much force it sent shivers down my spine—a million more than Tenchido’s ghost mansion could ever hope to achieve.

“Wh-Why did you say that, Mizuki-san?! Things were already awkward enough, and then you literally went and triggered her *on purpose*?!”

“Oh? I thought this was a guessing game. Otoi-san hides her first name stubbornly. You cannot touch it, so it’s the same. It’s not right?”

“Stop! Down! *Down!* I get what you’re saying, so for the love of heck please don’t say anything else!”

“Did I again make a mistake?”

“More than one! This isn’t an isekai! People aren’t just gonna yield to you the second you work out their secrets!” My eyes squeezed shut, I turned my face towards Otoi-san while I tried to hold Mizuki-san back. Otoi-san was gonna be *majorly* mad, and she was totally gonna kill us!

Slowly, slowly, I opened my eyes a crack. But Otoi-san was as expressionless as ever. No, actually...she was even *smiling* faintly.

“Ha ha ha. Y’can’t expect a new character to know everything. ’N’ I’m not immature enough to let it bother me.”

“O-Oh, right. Yeah, I guess there’s not much point getting so riled up about her going on and on about your triggers! That just goes to show how mature you really are, Otoi-san! Like cheese!”

I know it wasn’t exactly the most flattering thing to say, but sometimes you’ve just got to go with the flow. I just wanted to make sure Otoi-san wasn’t mad.

And it worked. She was still smiling—brightly, even. “I’ll just add Mizuki-san to my hit list for now.”

“So you *did* let it bother you!”

Sometimes, facial expressions could be misleading. I guess it was actions that spoke louder than both words and faces.

Case closed. I guess.

We went in through a staff entrance and were led to a room that I’d guess was something like the haunted house’s staff room. On the way, we passed a dressing room filled with lines of costume racks, and a makeup room with conspicuous mirrors and chairs. They looked just like the backstage rooms you’d expect idols and celebrities to get ready in, if not for the blood-covered zombie masks that peered back

at you through the partly open tops of the cardboard boxes we passed. Once you saw those, there was no denying you were in a haunted house.

The room we were led to was kinda big, and alongside the foreign staff holding recording equipment and the director, there were a few Japanese people here and there who also seemed to be involved in the production. We were basically outsiders, so nobody approached us to exchange business cards or anything, but from the conversations I was overhearing, it sounded like we had all sorts of people here: from monster actors and journalists to advertising representatives.

Just when I forget what a big deal this is, it creeps up on me again!

Even though I'd been tagging along with Mizuki-san all day, my knees only now started shaking. But if I was ever gonna make it big as an actress, I needed to get used to places like this.

I'll be fine! I can do it! At least, I hope I can!

I thought back to when Senpai told me he'd gotten Makigai Namako-sensei to write the scenarios for *Koyagi*. At first, I had freaked out because we were involved with such a big name, but I eventually got used to it after spending more time working alongside Makigai for the Alliance.

I slapped my cheeks to focus myself. And then...

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

I jumped when a woman's scream came outta nowhere! “Eek!”

Right—we were inside Tenchido's *Ghost Mansion*. This room looked just like a regular office space, devoid of scary stuff, so I'd clean forgotten. It was properly separated from the public area of the attraction, but I guess that meant barely anything when it came to such loud screams.

Mizuki-san giggled at my reaction. “A girl's funny faces are cute. I like especially when she jumps with surprise. It's endearing.”

“Don't you think that's a little *too* mean?” I groaned.

Mizuki-san giggled again. “If being here is scary, you can leave for a little while. I forgive you.”

“I-I'm not scared. This is a wonderful opportunity you've given me, and I'm not gonna run away just because of some monsters.”

“This admirable attitude is wonderful. But, for a while it is just the meeting, and there is no conversation useful for a learning actress. Or anything I want to ask for your help. Hm...” Mizuki-san ran a thoughtful fingertip over her throat. “My throat is dried. Can you buy me something to drink?”

“Didn't you have a cream soda at that stand just now?”

“A sweet drink dries your throat quicker. You can dry up and die, like in the desert. I am desiring the mineral water.”

“Oh, I see. I guess I can buy you some water...”

I didn't want to miss something important while I was away buying her water. I looked around the room at the other adults, but they were just laughing and chatting loudly. It looked like they were just chewing the fat instead of talking about anything serious or professional.

This might actually be the best time to leave the room.

B-But it wasn't like I *wanted* to leave, okay? The screams of visitors, and creepy atmosphere had nothing to do with it! I'm not that pathetic, okay? And I'm not like Senpai, who's always on about his precious logic but is actually scared of ghosts.

"Kohinata, grab a drink for me too, yeah?"

"Sure... Wait a sec, Otoi-san, how come you're acting like you own the place?!"

Otoi-san was slumped in a chair in the area where only the most important-looking people were sitting. "Arrogant" or "narcissistic" might have been impressive ways of describing what she was doing, but to me she just looked like a chonky cat lording it over the place. *Obviously* I wasn't gonna tell her what I thought—I didn't want her to get mad!

"If y'could get me another one of those cream sodas, that'd be great."

"You're gonna have *more* sugar?!"

"I think y'meant to say 'okey-de-cokey.'"

"Literally no one says that."

More accurately, a ton of girls in my class said it, but when I looked online, I couldn't find a single example of it being used. How did Otoi-san know about it anyway? Could it be that it actually *was* popular slang, and I was just looking in the wrong places?

I had a ton of questions, but just thinking about them over and over wasn't going to get me any answers. My teacher and my senpai needed something, and it was up to me as their kouhai to make it happen!

I gave them both a courteous, hearty salute. "But I got it! I'll be back with your orders lickety-split!"

I pulled my purse from my bag and raced out of the room.

And then I got lost.

"H-Huh? Where am I? ...Seriously?"

I'd been walking around, trying to find my way out of the building, when I found myself on a path I didn't recognize. On our way in, I'd followed the film crew without giving any thought to my surroundings, and when I left the staff room, I figured I just needed to go down the stairs to get to the first floor. So I did, and that was fine, but suddenly the floors and walls of the hallway around me were a

totally different color.

I was pretty sure the staff room was on the fourth floor. I'd only gone down one flight of stairs, so this had to be the third floor.

Most stairs let you go down several flights at once, but for some reason, this one had stopped after a single floor. Wasn't that kinda dumb?

"Oh, right. 'Cause it's a haunted house."

It was supposed to be like a dungeon, where certain stairs were blocked off so that you were forced to go down the hallways to get to the next level.

Makes sense.

Like hell it does!

Didn't that mean I'd wandered into the actual attraction?! That meant I was doing something really bad—going into the haunted house without even buying a ticket!

I wasn't supposed to do evil things—apart from bullying Senpai. And that wasn't even evil, because Senpai *enjoyed* it.

I was in major trouble. I needed to turn around and get back to the place I started. So I turned around.

"Argh! I have no clue which way I came from!"

The hallway was dimly lit, and the floors, walls, and ornaments were purposely filthy for effect. It was a confused, complicated jumble, and I couldn't work out how I'd gotten to my current location.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

"Eek!"

The screams were even louder out here, and so was the yelp I made in response.

How the heck had this happened? How had I, Kohinata Iroha, found myself trapped in a horror movie?

Urgh... Why me?!

Chapter 3: My Fake Ex-Girlfriend Has Nerves of Steel

KRAWW!

The monstrous bird's screech pierced through the sky, heralding the rumble of thunder, and opening up the darkness with the screams of humanity.

It was impossible to tell when the building was constructed, or whether it even adhered to regulations. The cracked walls, ivy running all over it, and bloody letters instructing any observers (who could read English, at least) to "Go to HELL" made it look like discounted real estate that wasn't even trying to hide the fact someone had been murdered in there.

And seriously, what was with all the horror-themed stuff I'd been getting into lately? Hadn't I been through enough of that for a lifetime by now?!

"This place is weird," I said. "What happened to the wonderful kingdom of dreams?"

"Calm down. You've gotta know Ghost Mansion. It's famous."

"Of course I do, it's just... They sure put a lotta effort into this place, huh?"

Ghost Mansion was often described as the black sheep of Tenchido games, as most of their titles were aimed at kids. That said, it had gained a strong cult following among hardcore horror fans. I guess I should be applauding them for so faithfully recreating the game world in real life, but it was scary enough already on the other side of a screen. Essentially, what they had done was build something guaranteed to traumatize anybody who entered.

Now, I wasn't a coward, but Mashiro was standing there without even a twitch in her neutral expression. She must have had nerves of steel.

"Quit stalling and let's go in," she said.

"H-Hey, why don't we go somewhere else? We could leave the haunted house for when we're at some other theme park."

"What? Are you stupid or something?" Mashiro turned her frosty gaze on me. "TEL's haunted house is recognized *worldwide* because of how good it is. You're *Koyagi's* producer. This place can teach you a ton about atmosphere and effects, and you're telling me you *don't* want to go in?"

“Nrkk... I seriously can’t argue with any of that.”

The themes of tragedy and terror that were locked away inside this building lined up perfectly with what the Alliance was trying to do with *Koyagi*. If I were to skip out on it, I may as well hand in my (metaphorical) producer’s badge.

“Okay. I’m man enough. Let’s do it.”

“Good. Let’s go!” Mashiro scurried forward impatiently, like she couldn’t wait to get in there. She stepped right up the door that was plastered with paper talismans and opened it without hesitation.

Throwing my shoulders back, I followed her. What, you think it’s pathetic that I’m hiding behind her? Well, you’re wrong. I was just protecting her from behind. I wasn’t letting her go first because I was scared or any—

“Purby, purby, purby! Weelcome to Tenchido Ghost Mansion!”

“GAAARGH!” I screamed.

And you would have too, if someone spoke right into your ear the second you stepped through the entrance.

“You’re being too loud, Aki. I can’t believe *that* made you scream. You’re an embarrassment.”

“S-Sorry, I didn’t mean to...”

“Ha ha ha! Your girlfriend certainly is strict. But don’t let it get you down! Your screams put smiles on our faces!”

So said the laughing man in the clown costume. This was Glown, a character from the game who acted as a guide to Ghost Mansion. His in-game art always made him look so charming, but in the dim lighting of this building, both his face and the way he spoke came off as just a little bit creepy.

“Now, let’s get back on track, hm? Welcome to Ghost Mansion! My name is Glown. I manage this place with a skip in my step, and make sure all of our residents are nice and comfortable! Are you two here to enter room 404?”

I blinked at him. “Huh?”

“That’s right. Room 404,” Mashiro answered, before whispering in my ear, “That’s how this attraction works. You get this kinda thing in other haunted houses too, usually when they want to create a sense of realism.”

“You sure know a lot about this. You must’ve been to a ton of theme parks.”

“When I was a shut-in, I used to go by myself to— I mean, I read about them online. Yeah. On the internet.”

“I see.”

For a second, I thought she was going to tell me something really sad, but I decided to do the kind thing and pretend I hadn’t noticed.

“Before I check you in, there are a few little things I need to share

with you,” Glown said, showing us a piece of paper.

Residents of Ghost Mansion must abide by the following rules:

Keep noise levels down to avoid disturbing other residents!

Don’t run in the hallways, or I’ll tear your legs off! (Just kidding!)

Keep your eyes on the residents when you interact with them!

Communication is important.

If you’re going to die, let me know first! Cleaning up dead bodies is a pain...

The rules were written in a scratchy font that perfectly matched the horror setting. This kind of foreshadowing reminded me of the theory about a frog boiling in water—basically, we were being set up to break one of these rules already, and when we did, we’d be attacked by ghosts or something.

It could hardly be more obvious. It might have been enough to fool your average visitor, but as a fellow entertainer, I saw right through it.

“Follow these rules for a fun-filled life in the mansion! And now, off I go!” Glown handed us the key to room 404, then headed off down the corridor, giggling all the while. The very moment he turned the corner and disappeared from view...

“AAAAAAAAAARGH!”

He screamed his last!

Simultaneously, the gloomy entrance hall suddenly lit up with crimson lights, and Glown’s hanging corpse (by which I mean a detailed dummy) bounced down from the ceiling. The music turned eerier, and 3D images of the ghosts of Tenchido characters appeared floating around us, cackling derisively.

“So this is it, huh? I’ll admit, the loud noises made me jump, but these 3D characters and the fake corpse are cute more than anything.”

“Hmph... Maybe this is scary for kids, but it does nothing for me. I hope they up their game,” Mashiro muttered, sounding frustrated that she might have hyped herself up too much for this.

Personally, this was the perfect level of scary for me. I was hoping they *didn’t* raise the bar.

“This way... Come this way...”

A white hand beckoned us from around the corner. The 3D characters whispered around us, urging us to follow it.

It seemed the game was afoot.

“Let’s go,” Mashiro said.

“Sure... Say, aren’t we gonna take one of those flashlights? It says there we’re allowed to.”

A box crammed with flashlights was positioned conspicuously by the wall.

“No.”

“Why not? If they’re here, surely that means the hallway’s gonna be too dark to walk down without one.”

“It says we’re *allowed* to take one. It doesn’t say we *have* to take one.”

“I think you’re nitpicking.”

“It means we can get through this house whether we take one or not. It’s a difficulty thing. If you’ve got a choice between easy, normal, and hard, obviously the right one to pick is—”

“Normal. That’s what real men go for.”

“No.”

“Look, part of being a man is knowing when something’s beyond you, and not going ham just because you can. Please understand.”

“This has nothing to do with manliness. Horror games are meant to be played on hard mode. It’s the principle.”

“Hnngh! I swear you don’t care this much about anything else!”

Mashiro giggled. “The supreme terror. The treasure trove of information. And if I lose my nerve, I’ve got you here to fall back on!” Her eyes were now spinning in their sockets as she laughed. Even the 3D *ghosts* looked scared of her. Which might work out great for me, as long as I stuck with her.

“Gaaargh!”

Forget what I said. The place was terrifying.

The first floor had images of Tenchido characters in funny Halloweenesque costumes flying around, still very much within the confines of child-friendly. But on the second floor, everything changed.

We were charged by life-sized zombie-ghost things, growling ghoulishly as they came for us, and making me scream louder than I’m pretty sure I’ve ever screamed since the very moment I was born. I used to think that haunted houses weren’t scary so long as you remembered that it was all fake and understood the mechanisms. Those turned out to be the arrogant words of a man whose only experience with haunted houses was the more lame varieties.

I needed to remember my goal in life—that was, becoming a professional in the world of fiction. I should know high-quality stories could sometimes have a way bigger effect on our users than anything in the natural world. That’s what made them so enjoyable, and what made them worth creating. This was a haunted house built to a world-class level of realism by some of the world’s most talented creators. Of course it was going to be scary.

Having said that, these ghosts were being played by human beings. Human beings I might just be able to reason with.

“Um, I was wondering if you could go a little easier on me so I don’t have a heart attack?”

“Ugaaargh!”

“You’re absolutely right. I’m sorry for asking!”

No sooner had negotiations with the ghost in front of me begun than they’d broken down.

I had to give props to the actor on this one. Even when I tried to tell myself it was just some guy in a costume, I couldn’t see it as anything other than a monster—one who couldn’t understand a word I was saying.

Wait, what if he genuinely believed he *was* a ghost?

“What are you doing, Aki? Are you stupid or something?”

“Please, don’t look at me like that! Have some compassion!”

How the heck was Mashiro not as terrified as me right now? She had to be messed up. Not only wasn’t she screaming, but she looked totally calm.

I followed a few steps after Mashiro, looking this way and that at our surroundings as we went. I was determined not to miss a single trick.

We were in a hallway. Japan had a lot of outdoor hallways, the kind apartment buildings have, where there’s a railing out in the open air. This one was fully indoors, like in those fancy high-rise apartment buildings or hotels.

In other words, we were in a closed-off space, giving the controllers of this place free rein to make things as scary as they pleased. The lights flickered constantly, the walls were full of holes, and sometimes the doors to either side of us would burst open and a ghost would jump out.

This truly was the most hellish place on Earth.

“Hm.”

“Gah! Wh-What’s wrong?! Why are you stopping?!”

“Shush! Look over there.”

“What, in front of the stairs to the next floor? ...Urk!”

At the end of the corridor was a fire door to the right-hand side. It was left open a crack, just enough for a single person to pass through. I could just about make out the stairs leading up through that gap.

So we’d made it through the second floor, and were now able to head up to the third. Great. There was just one gigantic problem.

“Like this place wasn’t creepy enough already!”

Right next to that small fire door was a person. They were sitting in a chair with their head drooping, but you didn’t need to be an evil genius with an IQ of 300 to tell that it was another ghost, what with the soot in its ashen hair, and its arms and legs that looked like dying tree bark.

“The only way out, and it’s guarded by a corpse. You can tell they’re really upping the fear factor here. Ten out of ten!”

“Stop getting so excited. Damn, what do you think’ll wake it up? If we can work that out, we’ll be able to get past.”

“What are you muttering about?”

“Ngh! Wait up, Mashiro! I was trying to come up with a plan!”

She hadn’t even hesitated; she was right past the ghost and already at the bottom of the stairs. She turned to me with a grimace. “Shut up. You’re being too loud.”

“Of course I am! You just walked past this ghost that’s ready to jump out at us like it was nothing!”

“Yeah, because I was excited to see it come to life. But it didn’t move even when I got close, which toyed with my expectations... Now there’s something new and exciting!” Mashiro shot me a thumbs-up. I was kind of in awe at how my girlfriend could make this haunted house look like child’s play.

Oh right, she’s not my girlfriend anymore.

“I guess we now know it doesn’t move, so that’s good.”

“Yeah. It works the first time, but it’ll spoil it if they try to pull this off again.”

“As far as I’m concerned, they can do it as many times as they want.”

Anyway, it seemed I had the all clear to go ahead.

I’m aware it’s not a very chivalrous thing to let a girl be the canary in a coal mine, but I was honestly relieved that Mashiro had stepped on the potential land mine first to see whether it would trigger or not.

Thinking of canaries, a totally irrelevant thought struck me about Canary. If you think of an editor as someone who reads and touches up a manuscript to make sure it’s not gonna bomb when it gets published, then wasn’t an editor sort of like a canary in a coal mine? Kiraboshi Kanaria’s pen name might have been deeper than I originally thought.

That was what ran through my head as I followed Mashiro and passed by the ghost.

Crash!

“Wha...?”

I turned around to see that the ghost had collapsed to the floor, its dark hair spread out in messy knots. Its withered limbs were scuttling like spider legs as it crawled its way towards me.

“Gimme...”

“U-Um... Good afternoon.”

“So lonely... Gimme your girlfriend...”

“Wait, this ghost wakes up because of *jealousy*?!”

That was the gimmick—it only started moving when the second member of a couple walked past it!

My rational analysis of the situation only lasted a split second; my legs had already started working before I'd even worked anything out. I sprinted as hard as I could, ready to bolt up the stairs.

"Wait."

I was stopped in my tracks by Mashiro, who was holding a finger to her lips.

"Stay quiet. You shouldn't run either."

"Are you kidding? It's coming after me!"

"Don't you remember the rules? Keep noise levels down, and don't run in the hallways."

"Oh..."

"You know what that means, right? If you break those rules, they'll probably send even more monsters after us."

"Oh, right. Yeah, that makes sense."

I'd asked Ozu to program a similar system into *Koyagi*. At one point the scenario cautioned the player to "listen carefully" while showing scary imagery accompanied by loud noises. If the player then turned down the volume on their phone, they'd be shown a host of even more terrifying images.

Was I a bastard or what?

You couldn't deny it was a pretty clever trick to make the game more immersive. I was still mad at having the tables turned on me, though.

Mashiro and I held hands as we slowly scaled the stairs towards the third floor. We kept our footsteps light and stayed completely silent, and soon the ghost behind us slowed down as well.

"They're holding hands... I'm so jealous..."

The ghost lamented as it clawed at the floor. I felt bad for it. If only it knew we weren't a real couple.

Wait. Hold up. I just realized something. Let me go back a few lines... Mashiro and I *held hands*? Oh crap, we were! We started holding them so casually, I didn't even notice till now.

Were we...allowed to be doing this? We weren't pretending to be a couple anymore.

"Um, Mashiro?"

"Shush." She glared at me.

This was twice she'd told me to shut up now; I didn't really have a choice but to do as told.

We kept climbing the gloomy stairs, and all I could think about was the warmth of her hand in mine. The hellscape continued to live up to its name, what with the eyeballs in the walls and some guy's decapitated head rolling around the landing, but my mind was filled

with the softness of Mashiro's hand, her face beside me, the subtly sweet fragrance coming off her... Everything about her was so distracting, I was even starting to forget how terrifying the ghost we ran into just now was.

I was feeling her hand especially keenly because we weren't saying anything. I knew my body temperature was strangely elevated; it felt like I was burning up. I tried to tell myself it was just my internal environment working over time because I was in a high-stress situation, but I knew what was really going on. It was because of what happened with Midori last night; because I could square this situation up against the feelings I'd acknowledged within myself. I was feeling off-kilter in a way that was difficult to describe.

We arrived at the third floor, still holding hands. The hallway was pitch black—*literally* pitch black. It had been gloomy on the lower floors, but I'd still been able to make out Mashiro's face, and the position of the walls and floor. Here, I could barely make out her profile. I couldn't tell how long the corridor was, and I couldn't see any of the traps that may or may not lie ahead.

"Uh, I'm pretty sure this is why we needed the flashlight."

Mashiro gave no response. She just stared into the darkness ahead. And then I felt her hand fall from mine. The sudden loss of warmth made the coming chill just a little more biting. At the same time, my eyes were getting used to the dark, and I could see the lines of her face with a little bit more clarity.

"Huh?" My voice cracked when I gasped at what I saw.

Her face was practically glowing, like a kid who'd found the item that let their favorite hero transform in the toy store. She brought her free hand up to the side of her face—no, up to her mouth.

Wait, isn't that like the stance you make when you're at the top of a mountain, or when you're cheering at field day, or—

"N-No... M-Mashiro, hold it right there..."

The rules were clear: keep noise levels down. Breaking that rule meant inviting tremendous terror. The reverse was also true, that so long as we kept to the rules, the fear level would stay relatively low. The reverse of *that* meant breaking the rules would *raise* the fear level. It was already clear to me which of the two options Mashiro was after.

"Come and get us!!!"

"The mad lass actually did it!"

Mashiro shouted as loudly as she could, using her hands to amplify her voice like a mountaineer or sports fan. Even her usually quiet voice grew loud against the dark corridor, spreading through the space like waves.

"Buooooooooorh!"

A stampede of ghosts flickered into life among the darkness.

“Yeah. This is it, Aki. There’s no point going to a haunted house if you’re not gonna crank the fun level up to eleven.”

“Earth to Mashiro! You know your eyes are spinning around like crazy, right?!”

The ghosts rushing towards us were pushing Mashiro to peak levels of excitement. She flung her arms wide to welcome the onslaught, a smile on her face as she walked forward.

“In case anybody was still in doubt...”

“Uh, yeah, right here! Me! Thanks!”

“*This* is it. This is my inspiration. Give me more! Give me all the fear!”

“M-Mashiro, you’re getting kinda far away from me!”

Having gone full adrenaline junkie, Mashiro broke into a run, laughing all the while. Running in the hallways—another rule broken, another penalty triggered—she’d completely disappeared into the darkness now.

“Wait... Don’t leave me... W...” I was right on the cusp of raising my voice when I quickly clamped my mouth shut. I swiveled my neck around to check my surroundings, and it seemed to creak with the movement.



The ghosts' glares were settled firmly on me. If I dared to shout or start running, they'd be on me like a swarm of mice on cheese. I had no doubt about it.

Hold on. Wouldn't it be more efficient—and less scary overall—to race through level 10 spookiness in one minute than to walk through level 5 spookiness in ten minutes?

No way was I gonna do that! I had zero confidence I could keep my sanity once they upped the fear factor even more.

I needed to switch my mental gears from teen on a class trip to game developer. If I could focus all my brainpower on appraising and analyzing this mansion's gimmicks, and thinking about how I could adapt them for *Koyagi*, I would no longer have the mental space to be scared.

It was time to be calm, cool, and collected. Time to analyze, compartmentalize, and scrutinize the very framework of the entertainment product before me. For the sake of the knowledge and body and flesh of our video game and no, I don't know what I'm talking about anymore, but I just needed to keep thinking so that I could stop thinking!

That's right. As long as my head remained clear, the ghosts of this mansion were completely trivial. Thinking back, all the monsters we'd encountered so far had spooked us at point-blank range, but none of them actually made physical contact. That made sense when you considered that most of TEL's clientele were female. We were living in times when being touched by a male actor without a good reason was enough for someone to cry sexual harassment after the fact, so there was no way these ghosts would go around touching people left, right, and center.

Even if that wasn't the reason, Tenchido could get into a ton of trouble if one of their employees touched a visitor and that visitor got hurt as a result.

These ghosts made it *look* like they were about to grab you, but there's no way they'd actually cross that line!

Ha ha ha! Who's laughing now, ghosts?!

I'd figured out their trick, and now I had nothing left to fear.

It was just like a video game. Once you'd learned the AI's behavioral patterns, there was no way you could ever lose to those NPCs again!

I managed to get out of hell's darkest zone and make it to the stairwell leading up to the next floor. I turned to the ghosts who were making no move to follow me to the stairwell, and felt my lips turn up

into a smile.

“Hah! You guys weren’t such a big deal after all! Feels bad, huh? Then keep chasing me if you wanna! Ha ha ha ha!”

“Uooooorgh!” (Translation: If that is what you wish...)

“Gaaargh! I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Not the stairs, please! This is s’posed to be a safe zone!”

Pro tip: bragging never gets you anywhere.

I know you’re a sensible kind of person who’ll take that to heart. Please do, because it’s important. Never forget to stay humble, no matter the situation.

“Anyway... Looks like we’ve been well and truly separated.”

Even though I’d made it to the stairs, there was no sign of Mashiro. Ordinarily, I’d think I might have passed her, seeing as this floor was so dark, but this was Mashiro; she seemed to know no fear and just kept on charging forward like a wild boar. The chances I passed her were pretty much zero.

More likely than not, she’d already gone up the stairs...to the fourth floor.

I looked up at the entrance to the next floor from the bottom of the stairs. There was a red light seeping through the gap in the open fire door—apparently, it wasn’t pitch black like floor three.

“The fourth floor...” I muttered, my mind getting to work. It was still set to creator mode.

If I were the planner behind Ghost Mansion, what would I have done? How would I have arranged these four floors of horror?

Four was an unlucky number—the number of death. I was sure that the next floor held the most violent, terrible, frightening traps imaginable.

“I don’t wanna go up there...”

I probably had about five near heart attacks just going through the first three floors. I knew the ghosts were just actors, and the cursed items and poltergeists were props, but in a place like this, logic didn’t really work as a shield.

And what was with the actors, anyway? They were way too talented.

It was probably because of all the time I’d spent watching Iroha act, but I just couldn’t stop myself analyzing and categorizing stuff like the tiny quirks of people’s acting ability, and *how* they performed. The details I perceived made me realize (even through my fear) that these actors weren’t your run-of-the-mill theme park employees.

I made it to the stairs because I’d taken courage from the realization the monsters couldn’t actually touch me. And they hadn’t—but even then, every time they got close to me, my defensive instincts were convinced I was about to get grabbed or bitten. My

limbs would get stiff, my brain would send panic signals every which way, and I'd start to break out in a sweat.

The way they acted, it looked just like they believed they *were* ghosts. Their talent was enough to give Iroha a run for her money—at least when they were playing ghosts—and these impressive actors stretched all the way up to the third floor. If we assumed the fourth floor cranked things up another notch, then I'd much, *much* rather not have to traverse it by myself.

"We haven't been attacked on the stairs so far. I'm guessing this is a safe zone, like a checkpoint or something."

I touched the wall of the landing. It wasn't actually a wall, per se. It was a blackout curtain hung *over* the wall. Actually, it wasn't even a curtain, but I only realized what it really was after I touched it. My touch pushed the material back, making my hand disappear into a dark cavity. There wasn't a wall on the other side; there was a space people could walk through.

"Of course. It's so people can throw in the towel."

The building itself was pretty big, and this place was scary enough to freak out a tough guy like me. There were definitely gonna be people giving in before the end, or others who downright fainted in fear or something.

There had to be a "normal" space here, separate from the scary floors, where people who were overcome with fear or panic could get out and receive medical attention, or whatever they needed. There was a need for assistant staff too, so there *had* to be a staff-only area somewhere in this place. The most probable area for such a place to exist was in the safe zone, where ghosts weren't allowed.

"My logic is flawless! Looks like I've just defeated Ghost Mansion."

I'd won. Therefore, I could bow out now if I wanted to.

"Like I'd do that. I can't just let Mashiro go on ahead while I dip—Huh?"

"Huh?"

Something grabbed onto my hand from the other side of the curtain. It gasped at the same time as I did.

And then, something incredibly unfortunate happened.

Whoever—or whatever—grabbed my hand started to fall, suddenly exerting a ton of weight on my arm. I worked out, but not nearly enough to withstand the weight of a full person pulling on me out of nowhere.

"Argh!"

"Eek!"

My body was pulled beyond the curtain, and I found myself falling face-first. My brain quickly realized I needed to take some sort of

action to protect myself, so I squeezed my eyes shut to brace for the pain, and pulled my chin in.

I'm ready for the pain now! Come at me! I've taken all the steps to make sure I'm not seriously injured!

The impact was squishy.

...

Squishy?

That...wasn't right.

Wasn't there supposed to be a *crash*! Or a *bang*?!

Someone had fallen onto the floor over here, and you're telling me there was no high-impact sound effect? Otoi-san would be ashamed.

"But...huh. It *does* feel soft. My face doesn't hurt at all."

"Ngh... Owie..."

A female voice came from underneath me. Apparently it was a woman who had cushioned my fall, probably one of the staff.

Nice job, idiot.

Because I'd tucked in my chin, my face had landed in her solar plexus, buried right in her underboobs. My defensive measures had been supposed to protect me, not make things painfully awkward. The spectacular feat mimicked the artistic manner in which romantic comedy protagonists fell. I never thought I'd see the day when I copied that trope in real life.

My place in the classroom was always on the very edge of the action, far from where a protagonist had any right to be. But for some reason, it felt like I was ticking off all the tropes for a romantic comedy on this class trip. What the heck was happening to my ordinary life? Was this all because I was taking a break from *Koyagi* and focusing on living a little bit more? Maybe this sort of stuff happened all the time, and all that was missing was my proper perspective.

Wait, what was with all the random reflections? This wasn't exactly the time for that.

And yeah, maybe I'd fallen face-first into the boobs of some haunted house staff member, but so what? My feelings were already set. I was already on a certain girl's route. It was actually pretty gross that, despite those feelings, I was now having inappropriate bodily contact with an unrelated girl.

"Um, sorry. Could you please get off me, whenever you're ready?"

"Aaah! No, *I'm* sorry! I'll get off right away, and— Wait, what?"

It was only after I'd jumped to my feet that I realized. It didn't matter that there was barely any lighting, I'd recognize this "staff member"'s face anywhere.

The amber-gold hair, the perfectly polite face reserved for lesser-known people that hid unbridled cheek, and the features so beautiful

even she knew it.

“Iroha?!”

“Huh? S-Senpai?!”

My kouhai from next door. My friend’s little sister, Kohinata Iroha.

We weren’t supposed to be meeting on this trip. She was supposed to be playing the good little honor student, going to school and taking her classes, and I was supposed to have abandoned her back home.

It looked like she was just as surprised to see me as I was to see her.

We pointed at each other, shouting out the first question that came to mind in unison.

“What are *you* doing here?!”

Chapter 4: Even After All This Time Apart, My Friend's Little Sister Still Has It In for Me

“That’s quite the wild story, but at least I know what you’re doing here now.”

“Yup...”

Iroha and I sat hidden among the many boxes that were stored in Ghost Mansion’s staff passageway, our knees to our chests. We’d just caught each other up on how we’d gotten here. I didn’t know whether or not to be impressed that Tsukinomori Mizuki had felt no shame in inviting a teenager to join her, when said teenager was *supposed* to be in school.

Iroha had messaged me about being in Kyoto. I probably should’ve taken it as foreshadowing.

“I’m super jealous that you got to see a Hollywood film set up close,” I said.

“Yup. I sure have learned a ton.”

Whether Iroha realized it herself or not, she *was* supremely lucky. If this Hollywood director hadn’t decided he wanted his movie to be a musical, a Broadway actress like Mizuki-san would never have been involved.

As the creator of a certain online message board once said in an interview, “I’m successful, but I’m no genius. If I had to name one talent I *did* have, it would be luck—the luck to have done the right thing at the right time.”

Maybe you don’t need “talent” to create something people will appreciate years from now. Maybe you just need to create something, and if it’s still there after however many years, people’ll look back and say you’re “talented.” And if that’s true, then Iroha was *already* a prodigy.

I realized I could be pretty soft on my creators; I still looked at them through the same rose-tinted glasses parents looked at their children with. Though I hoped that my high expectations of them were more based in reality than runaway emotion.

“Y’know, you don’t usually make stupid mistakes like accidentally entering the visitors section of the attraction when you were just looking to buy some drinks. What, did you forget to pick up the map

before you left the starting area?"

"Yup. I sure am pathetic, ain't I?"

"Uh, why are you talking like that?"

"Yup. Talkin' like what?"

"Like *that!* Like you've come here from the countryside or something." I looked to my side, only then noticing that Iroha had her gaze pointed in the completely opposite direction. Her ear poked through a gap in her golden-yellow hair. It looked a little red. "Iroha."

"Eek! Wh-What, Senpai?!"

"You're acting weird. You're not feeling sick or anything, are you?"

"Nope, I'm in tip-top shape! It's just, uh... Y'know, it's been a while since we've seen each other, so..."

"A while? I-It's only been a few days. Y-You're making a big deal out of nothing."

"Y-Yeah, I know, but, um... Um...!" Iroha wrung her hands as she tried to think of what to say.

Seriously, what was *up* with her? Her usual peskiness was nowhere to be seen. In fact, she seemed almost nervous. Her abnormal behavior was messing with my head too. It was making me restless, and I was finding it difficult to look at her directly.

Iroha looked up at me from beneath her eyelashes, her gaze searching. And then, her expression did a complete one-eighty.

"Nooo, I can't take it! It's been so long since I've seen you that you look more handsome than ever... My heart's pounding like a jackhammer because of you and it's so darn *annoying* I could literally die..."

"H-Hey, quit it. Y'know, if you turn away from me and whisper like that, I can only assume you're insulting me."

"Insulting you? I wasn't insulting you!"

"What *were* you saying then?"

"I-I can't tell you!"

"Why not? If you *really weren't* insulting me, you should be able to repeat it just fine."

"Nngh..."

Even if she was insulting me, it shouldn't have bothered me. Before now, it never would have.

What other people thought was irrelevant to the Alliance's progress. I'd always focused solely on the task in front of me, and both praise and criticism from anyone else went straight in one ear and out the other.

Despite that, right now I was strangely fixated on every word that came out of Iroha's mouth. What had she said about me? What did she think of me? Yeah, I know I was being *so* oversensitive, it was

laughable.

Where she had mumbled before, suddenly Iroha's voice burst out of its bounds. "Wh-Who cares what I was saying?! No one likes a nitpicker, especially not girls!"

"Girls don't like me anyway!"

"Y'know, Senpai, there are many things in this world that humanity would be happier without. Like death, and war, and your lack of self-confidence!" Iroha glared at me stoutly, her arms crossed.

"One of those things is so not like the others."

Speaking of, I was pretty sure I'd heard those words thrown around in memes on social media. As a producer, studying how those things spread so easily was probably a good idea. I wasn't sure whether to be impressed or exasperated that Iroha managed to find a situation to repeat those words in real life, though.

"Also, that doesn't make a lot of sense. The majority of humanity doesn't even know who I am, let alone how confident I am in myself."

"Y'know, Senpai, there are many things—"

"All right, I get it."

No doubt she was going to add my pedantry to the list of things humanity could do without.

"Anyway, we should probably leave the conversation here," I said, getting to my feet.

Iroha looked up at me. "Where are you going?"

"I gotta get back to the attraction. I came here with Mashiro."

"Mashiro-senpai's here too, huh?"

"We got separated, and she'll be out there all by herself right now. I gotta hurry and catch up with her."

I neglected to mention that we only got split up because Mashiro went on a rampage. However, I was more worried about the fact I was supposed to be spending this time with Mashiro, but was instead here with Iroha. It felt uncomfortable—awkward, even. And it made me feel like I was doing something wrong.

"So you're with Mashiro-senpai, huh? I see. Huh."

"What's up?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking how you're a disgrace to all studentkind, because you're here on a cutesy-wootsy date with your girlfriend instead of doing something educational, like you're *s'posed* to on a class trip. That's all."

"Oh, *that's* all? I don't think you get to tell me what is and isn't a disgrace, when you're the ex-honor student skipping school to come to Kyoto."

"I'm an ex-nothing; my honor student status is still perfectly intact! Unlike you, Senpai, I can skip a day or two without it affecting my grades."

“You could murder someone and still get top marks in everything too,” I grumbled, knowing she was right. In our society, once you’d established a reputation for yourself, it was difficult to get people to change their minds about you.

Suddenly, I spotted a figure in my peripheral vision. It was a woman wearing a sun visor, scurrying this way. If she wasn’t a member of staff, I didn’t know who was. I also didn’t know what the point of the sun visor was in a place that was not only indoors, but also blacker than the dark side of the moon. The woman spoke before I could ask.

“Excuse me, sir. This area is restricted to staff members. Or would you like to leave the attraction here?”

“Oh, uh, no thanks, I’ll head back in.”

“In that case, please go right that way. Only staff members and those who want to leave early are allowed in this space.”

She sure told me. But what could I say? I wasn’t supposed to be here.

I turned to go back to the stair landing without arguing.

“Your girlfriend too, please. Ma’am?”

“Huh?” Iroha gasped.

Startled, I turned around. The woman was blinking at us, her head cocked in confusion.

“Oh, did you perhaps want to leave the attraction by yourself?”

“Um...” Iroha faltered. I couldn’t blame her. This lady just assumed we were a couple out of nowhere.

Though I couldn’t really blame the staff member either. If we put aside the fact that Iroha was here with a Hollywood film crew, it was unclear where she stood in relation to them. She wasn’t quite an assistant, but she wasn’t quite a gofer either. There was no reason this woman should recognize her.

I would have at least expected Iroha to have some sort of visitor pass or sticker for security reasons, but I couldn’t see anything like that around her neck. Had she put it in her pocket maybe? In the words of longtime geeky event extraordinaire Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, that was a “big no-no” and completely missed the point of having a pass like that in the first place. She had actually gone on a massive tirade about that to me for ages, with way more enthusiasm than I’d ever seen her display in the classroom.

With that out of the way, it was time to save Iroha’s skin.

“Oh, actually, I wandered into this area by mistake and ran into this girl,” I explained.

“You two weren’t visiting the attraction together?”

“No, but it’s kind of a long story how we know each other. Right, Iroha?” I shot her a look, having set everything up to allow her to

cinch victory.

She nodded.

Looks like she got it!

Then she grabbed onto my arm and clung to it.

Wait, did I read that right? She grabbed onto my arm and...?

“We’re actually dating for real!”

“Huh?!”

Wait, wait, wait, what the hell happened for this to happen after the other thing happened?! Why the hell did she nod if she wasn’t gonna follow my silent instructions?!

“Oh, I see.”

And this lady *believed* her! She was even nodding like she’d known what was up all along!

I mean, yeah, I get it! Why would a girl and a guy be sitting so close together and chatting back here if they *weren’t* a couple exploring the haunted house together?! And supposing they weren’t, it would spark off a huge mystery in this woman’s mind complex enough to keep her up at night!

“What’re you doing, Iroha?” I asked.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff!”

“I’m sweating something pretty big over here, actually! And it feels like you’re breaking my arm off. I swear, you used to be way more gentle.”

“C’mon! Let’s get going, Senpai!”

“Please enjoy the remainder of the attraction!”

The staff member waved us off with a perfectly polite smile, while I was dragged away by a grinning Iroha.

“What the heck is wrong with you?”

“Look, I’m s’posed to be getting outta here and buying some drinks. Since I ran into you on the way, we might as well enjoy the haunted house together, right?”

We’d passed through the other side of the black curtain and were now on the landing together. Though I was back in hell, the sparkle in Iroha’s voice lessened my nerves and soothed my anxiety.

“This kinda feels like a weird twist of fate...”

“I can’t hear you. If you’ve got something to say, you need to share it with the class instead of whispering.”

“I just think it’s weird how we ended up together on the class trip.”

“Aren’t you glad it happened, though?”

“Not re— I mean, I dunno. It’s just super unlikely, is all, seeing as we’re in different year groups.”

“Yeeeah! Hee hee! Ha ha ha!”

“What’s so funny?”

“Heh heh heh! I dunno!” Iroha was grinning like she couldn’t physically hold back.

I’d appreciate it if she *didn’t* smile at me like that. It was the kind of smile to lead a virgin astray and get his hopes up. She seriously needed to save a smile like that for her actual crush. For the sake of my mental health if nothing else.

Her crush... Crush...

“Hrrrnh...”

“Senpai?”

“I-It’s nothing. I took an arrow to the knee yesterday, and it’s hurting. That’s all.”

“Oh, *really*? You sure you’re not just grinning ’cause you forgot how amazingly cute I am?”

“I-I’m sure! And I think you could stand to be a little less self-absorbed!”

“Hey, you’re shouting! That means I was right! Look, Senpai, there’s really nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Grrnh...”

I should’ve known Iroha would take a mile the second I gave her an inch. And because I now knew there was a small part of me absorbed by romantic feelings, I couldn’t completely deny what she was saying, dammit.

It was time to move on to my last resort. The forceful subject-changer, the ever-useful “by the way!” that could get me out of any uncomfortable topic.

“By the way, Iroha. H-How do you fare with scary stuff?”

“Pretty badly!”

See, it worked!

Honestly, I thought it was so obvious that she’d see right through me, but she didn’t say anything. Never underestimate the power of “by the way”!

I took advantage of the break in Iroha’s pestering to take a deep breath and calm myself before continuing. “Okay... That makes me a little less confident about what we’re gonna run into...”

“If we get attacked, I’m using you as a shield, Senpai! Quick, start doing bad stuff to raise their hatred levels!”

“Is that how ghosts work?”

What, they kept track of some kind of karma stat, where we’d be ignored if we were good, but hunted down if we were bad? Well, in that case, Iroha was screwed. Not only was she a delinquent who was skipping school, she also bullied her senpai.

But that made me a target too. Hopefully Buddha (or Jesus, since

this place had more of a western feel to it) would save me. Personally, I wasn't picky.

Although, I wasn't exactly blameless either—I mean, I was a full-on asshole, deserving of capital punishment. I'd abandoned Mashiro, my original date, to finish off this romantic stroll through a haunted house with Iroha. At this point, it probably didn't matter who I prayed to. I was better off waiting for whatever came after death and restarting there.

"That said, it's only a haunted house," Iroha said. "I know it's still gonna be scary, but it should be bearable as long as we remember that all these ghosts are being played by humans. And luckily, we're on the third floor. We've only got one floor left, so it's not long now till we reach the goal. We'll manage somehow."

I guess she wasn't wrong exactly. The fourth floor might have been scarier than the others, but we wouldn't be experiencing it for as long as I had the first three floors, and we were past the midway point now. The goal was in sight.

Yeah... We could do this for sure!

"Nope, we're screwed after all!"

"What the heck's with this weird place? It's like there's no one around at all! This has gotta be illegal in some way!"

"I don't think so, but I bet CERO'd have something to say about its age rating!"

"I thought this whole park was meant to be suitable for all ages!" Iroha wailed.

Here we were on the fourth floor of Ghost Mansion, our screams harmonizing while the floor and the walls dripped bright red blood(-like paint).

Countless ghosts had been coming at us without pause the very second we stepped foot onto this level.

First off, the fire door behind us closed with a bang. Then, handprints appeared all over the walls, and the doors started slamming closed and opening again repeatedly. Curses were being scrawled over the ceiling, like it actually had an inbuilt monitor or something.

"Gyaaaaaaaaah!"

We screamed in perfect unison. I couldn't remember a single word of those mansion rules. As if I'd have the wherewithal to do so right now!

I mean, if your school gets attacked by terrorists, you're gonna start running in the hallways, aren't you? None of the teachers are gonna call you out for it in a situation like that either.

This. This was like that.

“I’m done! I’m done! I’m so done! Senpai! You’d better not leave me behind!” Sounding like she was on the brink of tears, Iroha clung to me.

“Nngh?!” I squeaked in surprise. “I-I won’t, don’t worry!”

She was...way too close to me. Closer than close; there wasn’t an inch between us.

Leaving aside what she was *really* like for a moment, the name “Kohinata Iroha” conjured images of the prettiest girl in school, while “Ooboshi Akiteru,” if you could even remember who he was, brought up the image of an average teenage boy. You didn’t even have to engage your brain to work out what would happen to that boy if he found himself pressed against that gorgeous girl.

What made things worse was that Kohinata Iroha, my friend’s little sister and my annoying kouhai, was somebody who (reasoning aside) I was overly conscious of right now.

Fear had frozen my mind but excitement overwrote that to make it start burning again, only for it to grow cold as the awkwardness and guilt set in—and then for the screams of the ghosts after us to get my blood pumping and raising my temperature yet *again*. The constant back-and-forth between fear and excitement was maddening.

“Which way are we even s’posed to go?” Iroha asked.

“W-We should just keep moving forward—I’m sure that’ll get us closer to the end! Look! There’s an elevator! That’s gotta be it, right?”

Said elevator was at the end of the hallway with its doors open. The inside was glowing with a clear blue light that seemed deliberately conspicuous. It was painfully clear that the light meant safety. Lighting was used in a similar way in video games to distinguish between areas you’d get attacked, and areas you were safe.

“We can make it! We just gotta run into the elevator, Iroha!”

“G-Got it! Just don’t run off without me!”

“Obviously! I’m too scared to let go of your hand!”

“Jeez, you’re a massive wuss! But boy, am I glad for it right now!”

“Stop trying to wind me up when you’re running full-pelt with tears in your eyes!”

Iroha was so well versed in being annoying she could even do it on the fly like this. I’m pretty sure that counts as some sort of acrobatics.

As we shouted over each other and scrambled for the elevator, the ghosts stepped things up another couple of gears.

“STOP FLIRTING!”

Their voices were so throaty I couldn’t understand what they were saying, but I could *definitely* feel their anger and resentment. If I had to guess, they were mad because we were breaking so many rules right now. I couldn’t think of any other reason.

“C’mon, Iroha! We’re gonna...”

“...make it!”

I didn’t even know what we were shouting about anymore as we barreled into the elevator and pressed the “close door” button sixteen times in a row.

There was a *crash*, a *bang*, and a series of *slams* as the ghosts walloped the closed doors, making the cabin rock back and forth. I grimaced, worried that they were actually going to break through. But then, as though realizing their defeat, the banging suddenly stopped.

“*Going down.*”

A professional, female voice sounded from the speakers, and the elevator began its descent. It seemed I was right in thinking that this was a safe zone where the ghosts couldn’t come after us. That I hadn’t been totally sure of that until the very last minute just went to show the quality of acting training that went into creating these roles.

“Wh-Whew...” I gasped. “You alive?”

“I-I think so,” Iroha wheezed back. “B-But there were like, three times there I thought we were dead.”

“I get you. I had that four times.”

“Then I had it five.”

“It’s not a competition.”

“I need to make sure you don’t forget that I’m the dominant one in this relationship. You won’t find a senpai out there who’s stronger than their kouhai.”

“Wouldn’t it make you more domineering if you thought we were gonna die *fewer* times than me?”

It was a pointless argument, exchanged between bouts of ragged breathing, but Iroha’s teasing and bragging were proof that things were regaining normality.

And, as if I needed further proof, once we had our breath back, Iroha grinned at me mischievously. “Y’know, Senpai, I never knew you could scream like that. Are you a scaredy-cat or what?”

“You’re one to talk. You can’t pretend you *weren’t* a total mess out there.”

“Aww, but I’m just a frail young girl! Being terrified makes me even cuter!”

“Tch. Hiding behind your femininity, huh? That’s pretty low.”

Iroha puffed out her chest and wagged a finger at me. “There’s that, *and* there’s the fact I’m so darn good at adapting to any situation! Have you forgotten what my specialty is?”

I didn’t know why she was bragging like this all of a sudden, but what the heck.

“Acting,” I replied.

“Exactly! And acting is all about observing and copying!”

“Okay. What’s your point?”

“My point is...I observed those ghosts as much as I needed to. I now know everything about their behavior and thinking patterns, which means I can predict anything they might try to do to us after this. It’s gonna be mighty hard for me to be scared when I know exactly what’s about to happen! Whaddya think of that?”

“You get five outta ten.”

“Wait, what am I getting graded on?”

“That was annoying to listen to. But you played it too safe, and it was kinda bland.”

“You were scoring me on how *annoying* that was?!”

“What else would I score you on?” I grinned at her.

“Hmph! I guess it’s good you know you’re my punching bag, but picking on you’s gonna get boring if you’re just gonna start analyzing it all the time,” Iroha muttered, sulking.

I felt really calm right now. Exchanging the most pointless of blows with Iroha made me smile without even realizing it. Even though I was on a class trip—in the middle of a haunted house, no less—it felt like I was relaxing at home under the—*crash!*—kotatsu.

Huh?

Was it my imagination, or did the elevator just sway again—and pretty violently at that?

The ghosts had stopped attacking us. We were supposed to be on our way to the first floor already.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

“Gah!”

“Eek!”

Out of nowhere, an alarm went off. The blue light in here turned red and started to flicker. Crackling white noise interlaced with the announcement that came from the elevator’s speakers.

“Going down... Going...down...hell... Going down...to hell...”

“Elevators aren’t supposed to say that, right?!”

“I thought the blue meant we were safe!” Iroha cried.

“I think it did—but the blue’s gone now!”

“Even zombie games don’t change a save point into a monster house just like that!”

“This is your fault for bragging so hard! You totally jinxed it!”

“Excuse me?! Don’t pin this on me! You’re the one who jinxed it, saying this elevator was the end and everything!”

“Hell... Hell... Kill the couple! Hell...”

“EEP! WE’RE SORRY!!!” we yelled together.

The second the elevator reached the first floor and the doors opened, Iroha and I were outta there, sprinting towards the exit—a

large door that was flung open right in front of us, revealing what looked to be natural light—as fast as we could. Even when we entered the morgue, which seemed to be the final obstacle (though I don't know why there was a morgue in a freaking mansion, and I didn't have time to think about it) and people—sorry, ghosts—started getting up left and right to chase us, we didn't look back. We just kept on running.

And eventually...

“We made it...”

“We did it, Senpai!”

Iroha and I looked at each other.

“This is really the goal now, right?” she asked.

“Yup. We did it, Iroha. This is the one and only...”

“Goal!” we cried in unison and we beamed like marathon runners finally running through the golden tape at the end of a telethon.

It was a truly exhilarating moment. I could hear the ending theme, the roars of the waves and the cheers of the wind... Not in real life. Just in my head.

What ending theme? Probably the national anthem or something, I dunno. You pick.

But it felt genuinely amazing.

Thank God no one died.

“So, where's Mashiro-senpai then?”

“Not here, apparently.”

We were looking at a pile of people who had collapsed from fear just outside the Ghost Mansion. Only Iroha and I were still standing. It had taken us a split second to be overwhelmed by fear, but we recovered pretty quickly. I guess it was down to some sort of combination of being both sensitive *and* young.

Iroha was stretched up pointlessly on her toes as she looked around, but there was no sign of Mashiro at all. I'd assumed she had beaten the mansion and would be waiting for me at the exit, but apparently I'd assumed wrong.

I tried my phone, but neither a regular call nor LIME was getting me anywhere.

Just then, I remembered Mashiro getting a call from her editor, Canary, on our way here—more or less the moment we'd stepped out of the taxi. It sounded like they were arguing about something, but anyway, I wondered if it had drained her battery.

“She's not picking up her phone. I hope she's not still on her horror-addict rampage; I thought she'd calm down after getting out of the mansion.”

“I bet you did something to make her uncomfortable, Senpai.”

“I-I did *not*. What kinda guy d’you think I am?”

“I smell a rat. Why are your eyes darting all over the place if you’re innocent?”

“I’m telling you, I didn’t do anything.”

“Look me in the eye and say that!”

“Gngh!”

Iroha looked up at me from beneath her eyelashes—and she might as well have given me an uppercut to the jaw for the effect it had. The moment my brain registered her big eyes, my face automatically snapped to the side.

“See! You looked away! You can’t tell me you’re not guilty now!”

“I’m not!”

“How come you’re not looking me in the eye, then? What, your eyes’re made of magnets or something? And then mine are too, except both your and my eyes are like the same poles facing each other, so they naturally repel!”

I paused. “Look, there are times when guys just can’t look someone in the eye, okay?”

“Oooh, so it’d make things awkward for you to look right at me, you mean?” Her eyes dancing, Iroha dropped her hips like she was defending a goal. “Right!”

I dodged.

“Left!”

I dodged.

“Right, right, left, right, A, B, A, B!”

I dodged, dodged, dodged, and dodged again.

“One, two, hey!”

“Oh my God, *stop* trying to get into my field of view!” I yelled at her, snapping because of her high-speed hopping.

Instead of shrinking back, Iroha punched the air like she’d achieved something. “*Yes!* I got you mad!”

“That’s not a good thing!”

“Upupupu! It sure is fun to tease you, Senpai!”

“Gimme a break already...”

And I didn’t just mean from the teasing. I swear she was about to give me a heart attack.

At least Iroha seemed satisfied for now; she finally stepped back from me, like she was ready to do something more productive. She approached a group of college girls (read: victims of the haunted house) sitting exhausted on a bench and showed them her phone screen. After swapping a few words with them, she moved on to someone else, and didn’t return until she’d spoken to quite a few people.

“What were you doing?” I asked.

“Investigating. Looking for witnesses who might’ve seen Mashiro-senpai around.”

Iroha’s phone screen showed a photo of Mashiro.

Ah. I hadn’t thought of asking other people. Mashiro and I were close for a variety of reasons, including the fact we were childhood friends, so it might be a bit weird for me to say this, but she was stunning. She was gloomy and a former shut-in, which could distract from her looks, but looking at it from another perspective, those things could also work to make her a beautiful, forlorn maiden. Either way, her beauty alone would be enough to stick in people’s minds.

“How’d it go?”

“Bingo.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Isn’t it super cool how I can just be all, like, ‘bingo’ in a deep, suave voice, and you instantly think ‘damn, this girl’s cracked the entire case wide open’?”

“No. Where’s Mashiro?”

“Jeez, calm your tits.” Iroha pointed towards a neighboring area of the park. “Apparently she was heading in that direction.”

I spotted something that looked like a rollercoaster, and wondered if Mashiro left me behind to go have fun by herself. I *hoped* that was what she was doing, actually; I’d feel bad if she was lonely, wandering around alone.

There was only one way to make sure she was okay.

“Let’s go after her, Senpai!”

“Yeah. Wait, though. Aren’t you supposed to be buying drinks?”

“I can grab some water on the way no problem. You’re gonna need all the man power you can get to find her, right?”

“I don’t think just one extra person is gonna be that helpful, though.”

“It’s double what you’d have otherwise! C’mon, let’s move out!” Iroha grabbed my arm, and we were on our way.

Searching for Mashiro with Iroha like this, I had a sudden sense of déjà vu. We’d done just this in a shopping mall, back when Mashiro had only just transferred to our school.

But there was that other time too: when we searched for her at the summer festival.

For whatever reason, Mashiro went missing a lot. And for whatever reason, Iroha and I often teamed up to find her.

There was just one thing that made today different.

Iroha’s face, and the smile on it; they were radiant. So radiant, I couldn’t keep my eyes on her.

Yeah, I’m screwed. I can’t even look at her...

“Aaaaaaaaah! Both Iroha-chan and Mashiro-chan were so *cute* in this chapter! Please, don’t make me choose between them!”

“I totally agree, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, but you seriously need to chill.”

“Whew! Haah! Whew! Haah! Okay, I’m calm, I’m calm...and I’ve just remembered something! Mind if I tell you?”

“Uh, I guess not. Go on.”

“So you know how the ghost right before the second floor stairs and the one in the middle of the fourth floor were, like, the same sex, but also wearing matching outfits like couples do sometimes? I was just thinking, d’you think they were dating before they died? *Damn*, Ghost Mansion is amazing, inspiring all these headcanons...”

“Must be nice to be so happy all the time.”

Interlude: What Midori Saw 2

“Glug... Glug... Glug... Paaah!” As the fizz popped against my brain cells, an indescribable euphoria washed through me and I let out a loud, satisfied sigh.

This was a fancy café most fitting for the Kingdom of Dreams, decked out like a fantasy-style izakaya (that’s what we call traditional Japanese-style bars).

I slammed my empty glass down on the table as loudly as I could without causing any property damage, and called for another at the top of my lungs.

“I-I think you’ve had enough, Midori-san.” Yamada-san used both her hands to force down the one I’d raised to call the waiter. She was truly a kind, lovely girl. The awkward set of her features and the earnestness in her eyes told me she was genuinely worried about me from the bottom of her heart.

But it wasn’t enough to stop me! I cast away her grip and raised my hand again.

“I know you’re concerned, but please allow me a little more. I want the bubbles to overtake me, so I can forget absolutely everything.”



“It isn’t healthy to address your emotional issues by drinking,” Yamada-san said.

“Perhaps not if we were talking about alcohol, but this is cream soda! The sugar is letting my brain work harder.”

“Sure, in moderation. But drink too much and it’ll affect your brain power negatively. That, and you’ll put on weight like there’s no tomorrow!”

“You needn’t worry about that either. This’ll be my last one.”

“You said that about the last one too.”

“Ten minutes. A fourth drink. The birth of a heavy drinker.”

“I’ve never seen Midori-san like this, but it doesn’t feel as weird as it should.”

The stares of my fellow club members felt warm on my skin. Their somewhat dismissive reactions were lovely and refreshing, combining with the stimulation of the bubbles to soothe my hardened heart.

I was determined that this drink really would be the last one.

These girls had been indulging me for long enough now, and it would be a shame if we came all the way to Tenchido Eternaland just to sit in the café all day. As club president, I needed to broach the topic, else Yamada-san and the others might find it too difficult to say they wanted to leave.

“I apologize for keeping you all here so long. I’m your leader, yet I put myself first.”

“We don’t mind...”

“You should. I’m being selfish, knowing you’ll all forgive me in any case. But I bet you’re bored out of your minds, aren’t you?”

“We’re not bored,” Yamada-san answered simply.

“Huh?” My eyes widened in surprise—and everyone else was nodding in agreement. They looked like they really meant it too.

“You’re always so serious and dependable, Midori-san. This is probably the only time we’ll ever see you drunk, even if just on pop.”

“I can’t stop smiling!”

“Wait,” I interjected, “don’t tell me you all just see me as some sort of mascot?”

“We do!” came the immediate, unanimous response.

Oh, wow. Didn’t I have any authority as club president anymore?

My replacement cream soda arrived then. Yamada-san smiled wryly at it. “We’re not bored—but we *are* worried about you. Make sure this really is your last one, okay?”

“Okay... I understand.”

Yamada-san’s gentle scolding brought a glow to my heart and tears to my eyes. Though I’d resigned myself to being “bad” now, I still didn’t want to cause these great friends any more trouble than I

already had.

“It’s the last one, so I’m going to make sure it counts,” I said.

“Chug! Chug! Chug!” Two of the more excitable members of our club were clapping their hands in a rhythm.

My friends were right behind me, and I felt that keenly. This was what it meant to be an adolescent.

Being in love was lonely. But being young was bliss.

I couldn’t believe I had allowed myself to become so obsessed and discomposed over something as silly as *romance*. I was having a wonderful time making merry with my friends, and *without* Ooboshi-kun. *This* was happiness: the cheers of these girls and the cold bubbles traveling down my throat, working together to massage my most mischievous brain cells so that they released endless amounts of endorphins!

I would challenge everyone to find a more supreme version of happiness!

“Paaah!” Flooded by intense emotions, I downed the entirety of my cream soda. “Let us depart! I can’t just sit here brooding all day, can I? Let’s paint this theme park red, and...” I’d put down my empty glass and stood up, but the moment I had, I found my positive proclamation interrupted.

Why? I wasn’t even looking for him...

Like a perfect homing missile created by a bloodthirsty, warmongering state, I had locked on to what I saw almost automatically. I didn’t even know my eyes had such an ability.

It was right outside the café window.

Throngs of visitors were walking this way and that, like specks of dust in a nebula, and somehow, among all of them, my eyes had focused on those two in particular, like I was looking through a camera lens.

“Ooboshi-kun and Tsukinomori-sa— Wait, that isn’t her...”

Possibly because of my memory of before, my brain had tricked me into thinking that it was Tsukinomori Mashiro beside him—but it wasn’t.

It was a girl with bright, blonde hair. She wasn’t in uniform, and there was a sensitivity to each of her movements, even while she walked and talked at the same time. None of those things could be said about Tsukinomori-san.

“Iroha-chan?” I whispered, too quietly for the others to hear. They were staring at me now, wondering why I’d frozen as they each sipped their drinks through their straws. I knew this was none of my business, but I couldn’t work out why the two of them acting so normally made me think something strange was going on.

Kohinata Iroha.

She was Ooboshi-kun's kouhai and lived in the apartment next to his. She was also the younger sister of his best friend, Kohinata-kun. To sum up their relationship, she was his "friend's little sister." The drama club was deeply indebted to her, as she had coached us previously.

Now, what was *she* doing at Eternaland with Ooboshi-kun? Apart from anything else, it was a weekday, and she was a first-year. If she were a second-year, her presence in Kyoto would be explained by the class trip, but she wasn't. As such, this was a most unusual situation.

Presently, Iroha-chan was pointing at something and, with her arm entangled in Ooboshi-kun's, was dragging him along in the same direction. Their trajectory would lead them to the rollercoaster based on Tenchido's science-fiction game series.

If that wasn't a date, I didn't know what was.

My mind was flung into disarray.

Unless I was mistaken, Ooboshi-kun had been on a date with Tsukinomori-san just a short while earlier. And I was fairly sure I'd interpreted what I saw as him having feelings for her and nobody else.

So why was he now with a completely different girl?

And then there were his reactions, in particular the movements of his eyes. They were darting this way and that, never settling in one place. Here he had one of the school's most beautiful girls with a perfectly proportioned body on his arm, making herself fully vulnerable to him. Though she was right there, Ooboshi-kun was keeping his gaze at a strange angle, almost as though he was doing everything he could *not* to look at Iroha-chan.

That reaction told me he was overly conscious of her.

I was no mind reader; I could not begin to guess exactly *why* Ooboshi-kun was struggling to keep his eyes on Iroha-chan.

All I knew for certain was that every last one of Ooboshi-kun's thoughts and feelings were being dominated by Iroha-chan in that moment.

Ooboshi-kun was in love with Kohinata Iroha. I was sure that was the case. And how could I be wrong? I was the girl who got a perfect score in every test in every subject. The girl capable of solving every problem I came across.

There could be no doubt!

...

Hold on a second.

Who was Ooboshi-kun in love with?

His reactions to both girls was proof enough to me he was with the girl who occupied his heart in both cases. What on earth was wrong with this boy? First, he rejected me on account of his clear feelings for somebody else, and then the very next day he went and

created confusion! Not to mention, while his choice could have been either of these girls, he turned *me* down categorically—me and *only* me!

Confronted with a problem it could not solve, my girl genius brain was starting to overheat and emit black smoke.

Sensing the sudden buildup of stress, my frontal lobe released an emergency edict to crush my anxieties and to vent, vent, vent!

“I can’t take it!” I yelled. “Get me another drink!”

“Another one?! I thought you were done!”

Chapter 5: My Friend's Little Sister is on a Date with Me!

This was a world filled with screeching steel, twisted tracks, and cheerful cries. A space filled with rollercoaster after rollercoaster, jammed with people experiencing thrills of a much more positive nature than we'd encountered in Ghost Mansion.

Judging from the design choices around here, this place was based on *Mega Android*, whose first entry didn't come long after the dawn of video games. It was a sci-fi game set in space in the distant future. It was a popular series both in Japan and abroad, with an especially strong fan base in North America, and it stood among the games that cemented Tenchido's strong position in the overseas market.

But anyway, now I'm just being a know-it-all.

Right now, I was dealing with a far more serious problem than an expansive space adventure.

"We gotta hurry, Senpai! C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!"

More specifically, there was something else expansive, squashed up against my right arm.

Did Iroha *have* to stick this close to me? Couldn't she just...not?



I could pretend that I was a total gentleman who preferred to keep his distance all I liked, but the fact I never asked her to move away *out loud* proved I was actually something much more pathetic than that. The most I could do to fight back against this was to avoid looking at Iroha and getting visual affirmation of *just how close we were* at all costs.

“Look, Senpai!”

“No thanks. I’m not looking at anything.”

“The heck? This is no time to be fooling around!”

“I’m doing the total opposite right now! I don’t care what you say, I’m not gonna look and that’s final!”

“Huh? Seriously, are you sleepwalking or something? Just look! I found Mashiro-senpai!”

“What about Mashiro?”

“I. Found. Mashiro-senpai. The girl we’re *literally* looking for right now!”

Iroha’s scathingly patronizing tone brought me back to my senses. “Ah!”

Right—we *were* looking for Mashiro! We were in huge trouble if we couldn’t find her—and here I was getting distracted by other huge things.

“Look, over there! She’s getting on that ride!” Iroha pointed at what looked like a boarding gate for a spaceship, which Mashiro was going into. She’d skipped right past the long line. “Hey, how come she doesn’t have to join the line?”

“That’s the power of LVIP.”

“What’s LVIP? Sounds pretty epic.”

“It stands for Legendary VIP pass. It can only be issued by an elite class of employee, and the holder can skip the line for any attraction, boarding it via a special LVIP entrance. It basically gets you special treatment.”

“Nice, you sound like a total nerd. That, or someone who knows all about it explained the exact same thing to you recently.”

Yup. I’d pretty much parroted the total nerd who gave me the rundown.

“Anyway, roger that. Kinda sucks for us, though. If we wanna go after her, we’ll have to join this massive line, and then we’ll probably end up losing her. We could wait for her to come out, but there’s gonna be a ton of people doing just that at the exact same time...”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll have you know I’m an LVIP too!”

“Wh-What?!” Iroha blinked. “What the heck are you and Mashiro-senpai doing with those passes?”

“Right, I should probably explain. Y’see, we ran into Otoha-san,

and—”

“Thank you for your patience. All guests with ticket numbers below 221, please come forward to enter the ride.”

My explanation was interrupted by an attendant with a megaphone before it could even begin.

Iroha hurriedly yanked on my arm. “The ride’s starting! You can fill me in on the deets later—for now, let’s just use that LVIP pass of yours to barge right on in!”

“R-Right, good idea. We’ll probably end up next to Mashiro too, since we’re both LVIPs.”

Then we’d be reunited, and it’d be mission complete!

There was a time, not long ago, when my head was full of naive thoughts just like that one.

“What the hell’s Mashiro doing all the way over there?!”

“Look, Senpai, I know she might hear you if you shout, but you’re also gonna tick off all the other people here.”

We managed to get on the ride using my LVIP pass, but ended up on the very last car of a seven-car coaster. Each car held four people, and Iroha and I were given a car all to ourselves, no doubt thanks to the pass’s power. But although we didn’t have to sit next to any strangers, neither did Mashiro.

“I’m terribly sorry. The seat with the best view—the one at the front—has already been taken by another LVIP pass holder. Would you mind riding in a different car?”

“Oh, uh, we’re fine sharing with the other LVIP.”

“I couldn’t ask you to do that! LVIPs must be given as much space to enjoy themselves as possible! If you would like to sit at the front, I’d be happy to allow you that seat on the next ride, but I’m afraid I cannot offer it to you for this one.”

“But if you give both LVIPs a whole car each, won’t that deny spaces to a lot of other customers?”

“Oh, sir, that’s so thoughtful of you!”

“Huh?”

“I understand. You don’t want to monopolize such a big portion of the ride, for the sake of the people waiting, yes? But you don’t need to worry about that. We can’t allow our LVIPs to show such consideration, or we’ll get in trouble with the CEO.”

And that was how Iroha and I got completely cut off from Mashiro.

I always thought I was more assertive than passive, but maybe I was actually pretty easy to push around.

“This is so annoying,” I said. “I can see Mashiro right there, but we can’t even talk to her. Maybe we should try and pass a message along the cars to her and let her know we’re here?”

“Remember what I said about ticking off literally everyone? Not to mention making us look like we’re up to something.”

“I thought ticking people off was your bread and butter?”

“Hey, I am so not doing this! Anyway, I like ticking *you* off. To everyone else, I’m a perfectly innocent honor student who wouldn’t hurt a fly, remember?”

“Ugh, you really can’t make an exception just this once, huh?”

Iroha started *whistling* then. Was it just me, or was she in a weirdly good mood? She might just have been genuinely excited to be on this ride, despite the fact we weren’t able to meet up with Mashiro.

“The safety bars will now be lowered.”

The steel bars above our heads came down and settled into position with a satisfying clank. About eighty percent of me felt safer, feeling that solid bar in front of my stomach. The other twenty percent doubted whether a simple bar would be enough to stop me going flying. Following up on that thought was scaring me enough to consider hopping right off, so I desperately chased it from my mind.

It’ll be fun. They run this thing hundreds if not thousands of times a year, and there’s never been an accident. Never ever.

“Hey, Senpai, wanna know a fun fact?”

“What?”

“The slogan for this ride is ‘Experience the Universe!’ I saw it on a sign just now.”

“That seems kinda overdramatic. Though I guess that’s what makes a good slogan.”

“Apparently, you’re s’posed to feel like you’re in a space shuttle smashing through the atmosphere.”

“Now that’s just false advertising. You’d need to be able to break the first cosmic velocity for that, and that’s impossible for a rollercoaster.”

Iroha grinned.

“Like I said, impossible...right?” I said.

“I dunno. But it’s got a *reputation* for going that fast.” Iroha’s eyes sparkled with mischief. She was enjoying this way too much.

“You seem pretty relaxed to me. You realize you’re in the same boat—uh, car—as me, don’t you?”

Iroha cackled. “Meaning you think I’m a total scaredy-cat?”

“I *know* you’re a total scaredy-cat.”

“Methinks the lad hasn’t put enough thought into this.” Iroha wagged a finger at me, that smug grin still on her face.

The seat under my butt started clattering and vibrating, and the

car started to move.

"I'm a scaredy-cat when it comes to ghosts, sure," Iroha continued. "But that's it. I'm not scared of heights *or* roller coasters, and if you must know, I *love* them!"

"Wha— 'Love'? There's no way you've been to *that* many theme parks."

"*Every* normie and social butterfly goes to theme parks. It's like a rite of passage. When you've got a lot of friends who fit into that category, you end up going to a ton of them. Of course, for a friendless loner like you, it's more of a rarity, pfft!"

"You've been to a ton of theme parks...with other people?"

Of course she had. She was popular and beautiful at school, two things that offered her several advantages. I bet she got a lot of invitations too. If ever she wanted to go to a theme park, it would be a piece of cake for her to make it happen.

"Well, with mom."

"Yeah, thought so."

I played it off as though I knew what she had meant all along. I mean, I *did* know what she meant. Nothing about what she had said led to feelings of intense jealousy at all.

"Otoha-san takes you to theme parks then? I would've thought she'd ban it for being a form of entertainment."

"She was weirdly chill about anything you can't access via a TV or smartphone. Though it's also kinda weird to ban all forms of entertainment for your young teenage girl *except* visiting theme parks with you."

"Sounds to me like she was treating you like a five-year-old the whole time."

"La, la, la! Can't hear you! I'm not in the mood to relive my trauma, thanks!"

I would never have expected Iroha's bountiful experience at theme parks to be linked to her mom's refusal to let her grow up. I guess you can never tell when the story's gonna cash in on its foreshadowing.

Speaking of Otoha-san...

I never did finish explaining to Iroha why I had an LVIP pass. Now seemed like a good opportunity. Otoha-san might still be hanging around the park; if Otoha-san found out Iroha was skipping school to hang out with a Hollywood film crew, she'd die of shock so fast she wouldn't even have time to lose that sugary smile that was always on her face. And I didn't even want to *think* what Otoha-san's reaction might be if she happened to survive the experience.

"Hey, Iroha, you know what I was saying earlier about—"

“Oooh! Here it comes, Senpai.”

Less than a second after the words were out of my mouth, all thought had been wiped from my mind—by a sudden high-speed drop that sent us breaking the first cosmic velocity. That was what it felt like, at least.

“UGHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOORBBBBBBGH!”

The last thing I remembered was the car leisurely climbing the track, but once it reached its peak, it was clear it wasn’t going to wait for me to switch my brain from conversation mode to adrenaline mode.

We were sent on a merciless downward plunge. I could feel the powerful Gs twisting my face, and it felt like the seat beneath my butt had been pulled away out of nowhere. I knew it was pointless, but I still clenched the lower part of my body like I was expecting to regain some stability.

Sound itself was left well behind us. Even the screams of the female passengers in the car in front of us swept past and vanished like running water.

“Aaah! Aaah! Aaaaaaaaah!”

As for Iroha, who was sitting right next to me, her screams were coming in loud and clear at point-blank range. Wasn’t she just boasting about how she could deal with thrill rides? What was with all this screaming, then?

“Eek! Omgosh, this is so much fun! You think so too, right Senpai? Or are you *scared*? Aha ha ha!”

Yeah, no, I take it back. She was fine. Seriously, how the heck was it possible to wind someone up while you were being tossed around at ultrahigh speeds? With skills like that, I bet she’d be able to qualify as an astronaut no problem.

“What! Could be! Fun! About! This?!” Pulling together every last nerve I had, I shot back at Iroha while the air beat up my face.

“Chill, Senpai! The ride’ll start decelerating now, and we’ll be on easy mode!”

“Wait, really?!”

“Yup! See the part of the track where it’s all twisty?”

“Oh yeah!”

“Think about it! There’s no way we can go round all those corners at this speed!”

“Hey, you’re right!”

“We’re bound to slow down! And that’ll be your chance for some relaxation!”

“Yes!”

The coaster started rounding the corners at full speed.

“You biiitch!”

“Aha ha ha ha! Gotcha!” Iroha burst into laughter as I screamed, and both of us got battered from all directions. “Going around the corners so fast is the best part of any coaster! No way was it gonna slow down! I *knew* you were the real scaredy-cat, Senpai! D’aww, you’re so cyute!”

“I’ve got no comeback daaaaaaaaammit!”

This time, our journey through hell ended in the blink of an eye.

“Senpai, you good?”

“Y-Yeah, I’m...fine. Wait a sec... My legs...”

By the time the ride was finished and the car had returned to the terminal, my head was spinning. When the attendant showed us off, the lower half of my body was trembling so badly I sank to the ground, leading Iroha to bend over and poke me to make sure I was still alive.

I’d heard that metaphor about a newborn foal struggling to stand up so many times, and yet I never thought I’d end up like that in real life. I probably shouldn’t have clenched my legs so much; the burden I’d placed on them was making them unreliable now.

“I-I thought we were dead meat.”

“Your face’s gone totally white. You even look too broken for me to bully...”

“Urrrgh...”

“There, there. Nice, deep breaths.” Iroha started stroking my back gently while I hunched over on the ground.

I was surprised how kind she was being now that she realized I was genuinely suffering, given how cheeky she’d been on the ride itself. She knew when to quit—and that was because Iroha, though annoying beyond belief, was genuinely kindhearted.

I breathed deeply for a little bit. “O-Okay... I think I’m starting to feel a little better.”

“I didn’t realize you were such a wimp, Senpai.”

“You don’t need to start bullying me again the moment I show the slightest hint of recovery.”

“But you always taught me that efficiency is everything—which is why I can’t let even a tiny opportunity go to waste!”

“There are times when you *don’t* have to be a model kouhai, you know.”

Iroha giggled bashfully as though I were complimenting her. I wasn’t. But it’d make me look weird if I pointed that out now, so I let her revel in it. Urgh.

“By the way, Senpai, I’ve got some bad news.”

“What’s that?”

“I have no idea where Mashiro-senpai’s gone.”

“Mashiro...” I froze, at first unsure what Mashiro had to do with anything. “...Ah!”

“You forgot, huh?”

“It’s not my fault! Blame the first cosmic velocity!”

“Sure, pin the blame on an intangible concept.”

Why the hell had I gone on that roller coaster if we weren’t even going to reunite with Mashiro at the end of it? Just to suffer?!

“We can’t let her go too far. We’re going after her, Iroha!”

“Wilco!” Iroha paused. “Wait, are you okay?”

“No...”

My legs were still about as stable as jelly.

Our investigation proved difficult. *Really* difficult.

Scratch that, I’m lying. In itself, looking for Mashiro was simple. It seemed like she was riding all the nearby attractions in order, so we spotted her right away. The hard part was chasing her down when she was using her LVIP pass to skip every line. I tried using mine, but they never put us anywhere near her.

When Iroha and I learned our lesson and started waiting at the rides’ exits instead, we’d get flagged down by a desperate attendant thinking we wanted to get on the ride and that they were neglecting a LVIP. And then they’d usher us right to the LVIP entrance anyway, so forcefully it was hard to argue with them.

In the end, Iroha and I ended up riding a ton of the attractions together. Around halfway through, I realized it was sort of like we were on a date—but I was careful not to say anything or even really acknowledge the thought. It would be too difficult to face Mashiro afterwards.

Our troubles aside, I had to appreciate the high quality of each ride, and I was pleased to see Iroha seemed to be enjoying herself the entire time. If we were riding them anyway, we might as well have fun with it. And just seeing Iroha have fun was enough to put a smile on my face.

After a few rides, we ended up on a water ball attraction, based on an RPG where you catch monsters.

“Let’s goooooooooo!”

“Wait, Iroha! Slow down! We’re gonna go off course— Gah!”

“Eek! Senpai’s clinging to me!”

“Not on purpose!”

We were messing around on the water inside a giant inflatable ball. It was harder to control when you had two people in one ball and I’d ended up falling, which was how Iroha and I found ourselves a tangle of limbs. It wasn’t until we’d tumbled out of the ball at the end

that we could finally put some distance between us.
Which was also when this happened:
“What the heck are you doing with Iroha-chan?!”
Our wish to reunite with Mashiro was granted.
Which was fine and all, but did it have to be *now*?

“That’s quite the wild story. But at least I know what Iroha-chan’s doing here now.”

“Yup...”

“And then even more wild stuff happened and you two ran into each other?”

“Yup...”

“And then *even more* wild stuff happened, and you ended up having a fun date at the park.”

“Yup... No, wait, we weren’t having fun. We were on the brink of death several times. A ‘fun date’ makes it sound like there was no suffering involved whatsoever.”

“If you’re going to talk back to me, at least say something that makes sense!”

“Sorry, ma’am...”

We were sitting on a backless bench a short distance away from the water balls. Mashiro was standing over us angrily with her arms folded, while Iroha and I kneeled subserviently on the bench as we explained everything.

Almost everything, at least. We couldn’t tell Mashiro that Iroha was the voice actress for *Koyagi*, so we skipped over that part, and instead said Mizuki-san had asked Iroha to do some work for her on set. It took a pretty bald-faced lie to explain why Iroha was chosen, when she wasn’t supposed to have any ambition for acting.

“I still don’t get why Iroha-chan’s in Kyoto. That part was really convoluted...”

“Yeah, I know,” I said.

“Same!” Iroha waved her hand in the air. “I totally agree!”

“You shut up.” I delivered her a light flick.

Mashiro sighed at our familiar antics. “But I’m gonna drop it. It’s my fault for going crazy in the haunted house too. All that horror stuff got me so excited, I sorta forgot where I was...”

“It’s not your fault, Mashiro. It’s mine for freaking out.”

“That too. You deserved to die back there.”

“Ouch...” As usual, Mashiro’s sharp tongue pierced me to the core. I didn’t argue with her, if only because she was completely right about my shameful cowardice.

“What’s mom thinking, anyway?” Mashiro continued. “If you need

someone to help with filming, you're not gonna pick your daughter's friend, are you? And on a weekday, when she's got school..."

"Weird as heck," I agreed.

"I know you, Iroha-chan. I bet you're just here 'cause you wanted to come to Kyoto, aren't you?"

"Ughah! You got me there..."

Another victim of Mashiro's forked tongue. She must have sharpened it lately, because it was especially painful today.

Dissatisfied, Mashiro exhaled loudly through her nose. "I guess I don't really have a right to be mad."

"Huh?" Iroha blinked.

Mashiro hesitated before speaking again. "We broke up. We're not fake dating anymore."

"Wh..." Iroha froze.

"We broke up," Mashiro said again.

"Wh... Wh... *What?!'*" Iroha blinked again. And again. And again.

"We broke up."

"Wh... What?! You broke up?!" Iroha yelled, loud enough to vaporize my eardrums. After three times, she finally got it. "Senpai, Senpai, Senpai! Is Mashiro-senpai telling the truth right now?!"

"Sounds about right to me. She broke up with me this morning." I tried to keep things concise as Iroha bombarded me with a flurry of words. I could see why she was surprised—it *was* pretty sudden. I'd been blindsided by it myself.

"I still like Aki," Mashiro explained. "And we're gonna end up dating anyway, so there's no point in having a fake relationship."

"I'm only half with you. If you like him, isn't being his fake girlfriend better than just being a friend?"

"Sometimes you have to lose a battle so you can win the war," Mashiro said calmly.

"Okay...?" Iroha's brow furrowed. She was clearly still confused.

It was nice when girls bonded by talking about relationships. It was less nice when they did it right in front of me and I was one of the parties involved. Especially since both of them were attractive, popular girls in their own right. The whole thing was putting me even more on edge thanks to the realization I had last night about where my true feelings lay.

"My point is, I don't have a right to be jealous. Anyway, Iroha-chan, haven't you got somewhere to be? My mom asked you for something, right?"

"Huh? Oh, right!" Iroha leaped skillfully from a kneeling position to her feet.

I'd totally forgotten too—she was supposed to be buying a drink for Mizuki-san when we ran into each other.

Iroha hopped down from the bench. "I'm gonna get going, then."
"You should," Mashiro said. "Mom's terrifying when she gets mad."

"Like you," I said.

"Excuse me?" Mashiro gave me a withering look.

"N-Nothing..."

Oops.

"Aha ha ha! Serves you right, Senpai!"

"What's it got to do with y— How the heck did you get all the way over there?!" I turned around to scold Iroha for laughing at my plight, only to find she was already several meters away, waving.

"Catch ya later, Senpais! Hope you enjoy the rest of your trip! Bye-bye!" Iroha kept facing us and waving until she was totally out of sight. Honestly, I was surprised she didn't crash into anything.

"Interesting that she was able to smile. I guess she didn't look reluctant to leave because of her acting ability..."

"Hm? You say something, Mashiro?"

"No. And we should get going too. There are still a ton of things I wanna see."

"Sure..."

We started walking again, Mashiro pulling me by the hand. I was endlessly curious about what Iroha was getting up to on the film set, but right now I had the class trip to worry about. I needed to focus on enjoying it while it lasted—particularly the time I got to spend with Mashiro.

"That scene with Aki and Iroha-chan's date was so blessed! Don'tcha think, Ozuma-kun?"

"I sure do! It's the best ship, hands down!"

"But did you see how Mashiro-chan was all jealous? Now *that* was adorable! Don'tcha think, Ozuma-kun?"

"Y'know, Tsukinomori-san and Aki make a pretty good couple too..."

"Nnngh, I can't pick between them! D'you think we could get a harem ending maybe?"

"Sure, if this were a video game. Unfortunately we live in the real world."

"Aaargh! Bummer!"

Interlude: Sasara and Chatarou

“Hey, guys, Tomosaka Sasara here! Welcome to today’s vlog! Yahoo!”

As a majorly popular teenage Pinstagram influencer, the first thing I did after school is set up the camera. I know that sounds fancy and everything, but I didn’t actually have a studio; I recorded my vlogs in my humble home. *But*, I worked a ton on the interior design of my filming spot to make it look as stylish as possible, and to erase any signs that I lived out my day-to-day life there.

I couldn’t have done it without the recent lucrative sponsorship deals I signed. More of them poured in after I had that minor controversy online—it helped get my name out there. I got super depressed when it was all going down, but that was before I knew I was gonna get this lucky break. Guess there was just something about me that meant I could turn around even the very worst of situations!

“As soon as I get home from school, I get changed. I pull off my stuffy uniform and get into my loungewear for a bit of relaxation! Even the most stylish of girls has gotta be comfy at home. What, you’re disappointed? Or is that just what you expected? ‘Cause if so, shut up!”

Guessing how my followers were gonna react and responding to them ahead of time was one of my special techniques. Even when you’re not streaming live, it’s important to pretend you’re interacting with your viewers’ comments in real time.

My original fans followed me purely because of my fashion vlogging and charisma, but after keeping a close eye on my recent numbers, I realized that I got a better response from people by playing up some minor imperfections. My idol, Hoshino-san, told me that affinity with your fans is the next most important thing after charisma. When I tried it out and got a good response, I was even more blown away by how impressive and smart she is!

So I guessed pretending to be a bit of a ditz counted as an advanced skill. Very interesting indeed.

Just then, my lips twisted into a pout as I heard a voice in my head respond to my thoughts.

“Right, pretending! Sure, we’ll go with that.”

It was Iroha’s voice, and somehow she made it sound like I was dumb without really giving me any room to argue back.

She'd really made it so my brain bullied me by itself now, huh? I was starting to think hanging around her was bad for my sanity.

Iroha was in Kyoto. If I was hearing her voice from all the way out here, it was nothing more than a hallucination.

Also, I was supposed to be filming a fun vlog right now! I couldn't let myself get distracted; I needed to be all smiles!

"When I'm at home, I guess I'm usually on my phone. Oh, but I don't just scroll through random sites! I check what's trending on Pinsta!"

I filmed myself lounging on the couch and tapping away at my phone.

In case you were wondering, I shot my videos on a separate phone I set up on a tripod so it gave a high-angle view of the room. These days, I guess you kinda need two phones, especially if you're an influencer.

I opened Pinsta to see what the accounts I followed were posting about.

"Hey, Enthusaland's posted something!"

Enthusaland was all about visiting various theme parks across Japan and posting images along with trivia and obscure tidbits. I was too busy to go to places like that myself, and looking at this person's fun posts made me feel like I'd been right there with them.

The account didn't mention their gender or age, but the profile picture featured a young, businesslike woman with long hair, and the voice-over was feminine, so I assumed she was the account owner. I was just glad she wasn't some gross greasy nerd.

Part of her account's appeal was the long, rambling posts she wrote, but since she was a pretty Asian woman, they didn't come off as creepy at all.

Her new post was about...Tenchido Eternaland? That place was super hot right now! And it was a great spot to take a video too!

"I never thought I'd ever get to see an actual LVIP in the wild! It's enough to make even a girl like me break out in a sweat!"

Hmm. I didn't know what an "LVIP" was, but it was obvious this was a big deal. It had me just about curious enough to watch the rest of the video.

"Hm?"

Some text flashed up on the video, reading "LVIP pass!" It was accompanied by a hastily edited-in red arrow pointing at some guy's neck—where the pass was hanging. Some guy wearing a *super* familiar uniform.

But I literally didn't care about that guy right now, because there was someone else in the shot.

"Th-That's Iroha!"

There were no two ways about it! It was Kohinata Iroha, my friend who I sent away to Kyoto yesterday. What's more, she was obviously on a lovely date with Ooboshi-senpai—the guy with the LVIP pass.

This girl was something else.

She'd been moping because her beloved Ooboshi-senpai was all the way in Kyoto, and she'd actually managed to track him down. She was way too good at stalking, and I was actually kinda grossed out.

Also, I just realized I'd shouted out her name while the camera was still rolling. But that was fine. It might be a tiny bit of extra editing, but I could still use this footage if I just cut that out. So, I would keep filming. Since the camera was fixed, I'd be able to cut it without it being too jarring and—

“Shut up, sis!”

Crash! Bang!

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

The door swung open, sending my filming phone and its tripod flying.

A tall, broad-shouldered guy had just crashed into my room. His tryhard hairstyle and rugged features made it look like he desperately wanted to be in a gang, but he was actually my younger brother. My *dumbass* younger brother: Tomosaka Chatarou.

“What the hell are you doing, you idiot?! You totally messed up the angle and positioning of the camera!”

“Cram it! I'm trying to study for my exams and all I can hear is you talking to yourself on and on and on and on, and then shouting randomly in a stupid loud voice! I can't take it anymore!”

“Hnnngh! You messed up my vlog!”

“I don't care about your stinky vlog! Don't you have any homework you're s'posed to be doing?! This is why you never beat Kohinata-senpai in anything, 'cause you're always wasting your time with this lame stuff.”

“Excuse me?! All that airhead ever thinks about is boys—don't start comparing me to her! You're seriously gonna tell me she's all perfect when you *know* what she's doing right now?!”

“I *don't* know what she's doing, buttface! Why don'tcha tell me?”

“I'm not gonna tell you, buttface! I'm not the kinda snake who sells out her friends!”

Sure, Iroha was annoying, but that wasn't relevant. I wasn't about to tell my brother she liked Ooboshi-senpai, totally snapped when he left, then dipped out of school to go see him. Call it an honor thing, or whatever else you want.

Anyway, I was literally seething right now, and I hadn't been this mad in a while. How dare my stupid little brother ruin my vlog?!

I glared at him, letting myself fill up with murderous rage, then jabbed my thumb in the direction of the door. “Let’s take this to the living room! We’ll let the shogi board do the talking!”

“Bring it! I’d like to see you get past my offensive bear-in-the-hole strat!”

Our sibling quarrel took a random turn that completely missed the point of the original argument, but I guess that’s a story for another day...

Chapter 6: My Ex-(fake)-Girlfriend Has a Confession for Me!

As the sinking sun started to dye the park crimson, the shadows behind the statues of Tenchido's famous enemy characters began to stretch. The wind was growing colder, and time seemed to be slowing just a tiny bit. Though there was no change in the child-friendly music in the air, it somehow seemed melancholic all of a sudden.

I looked at Mashiro's face as she walked beside me. She was quietly sipping at the straw stuck in her cup of the cream soda we bought from a stall earlier. The red hues in the sky complimented her silver hair nicely.

Since reuniting, we went on loads of rides, stopped by several stalls, and interacted with many of the Tenchido characters walking around the park. Even so, when I tried to recall the memories of our time here, all I could remember was Mashiro's face. There had been this inexplicable seriousness to it this entire time.

She didn't look like a girl on a date. If I had to describe it, she looked more like a scientist peering through a magnifying glass. I didn't get the impression she was enjoying the time spent with me at all. Maybe it was rude of me to presume.

"Aki. Why don't we go on that to finish up?" Mashiro pointed.

An imposing behemoth, the giant ride was enshrined in the most visible part of the park. It was the most common staple of amusement park rides; I doubt you'd ever find a park that *didn't* have one. It was the star of any theme park date, one that had brought countless couples together.

"The Ferris wheel?"

"Yeah. The Ferris wheel. It's the perfect way to end the day."

"That's true. Let's go, then."

I had no reason to refuse her. Thanks to our LVIP passes, we were shown to the ride right away. The world was just about to slip into evening, and the nightly parade was due to start soon; they say that at this time of day, the crowds in the park are split between those who are hoping to find a good spot to watch it, and those who aren't interested.

A gondola decorated with faces of Tenchido characters came down in front of us, and an attendant helped Mashiro and me inside. The inside was painted with vivid colors, creating a space that was

comfortable and dreamlike—this was the Kingdom of Dreams, after all.

The petite Mashiro settled herself down in the seat across from me. She looked very much like a fairytale princess. She was endlessly pretty—she always had been—like something right out of a painting.

There was a clunk, and the gondola began to move slowly, and soon it felt like we were floating. Outside, the ground was getting gradually farther and farther away, second by second.

“How was it?” Mashiro’s sudden question broke the silence. I looked at her to see she was gazing downward out of the window. As though realizing she hadn’t given much context, she continued. “What did you think of all the places we saw today?”

“Uh...” I sifted through my memories as I looked down on the whole of Eternaland, the whole of this dreamy kingdom, from above. But it didn’t matter how much I tried. Just like before, the only thing I could remember was Mashiro’s face. That, and the intensely terrifying experience I had in Ghost Mansion, and my encounter with Iroha—but those were the only exceptions. “Sorry. I was distracted today, and my mind’s been kinda fuzzy.”

Telling her the truth would be way too embarrassing right now, so I only gave her half the story.

“Huh.” Mashiro narrowed her eyes at me, looking somewhat exasperated. She then gave a resigned sigh and pulled out her phone. “That’s not like the levelheaded producer I know.”

Producer? It was odd to hear Mashiro refer to me like that. Of course she knew I led the 05th Floor Alliance; it was one of the biggest bargaining pieces in the deal I had with Tsukinomori-san. Then there was the time Murasaki Shikibu-sensei had collapsed and Mashiro had stayed up with me all night to work out how to increase *Koyagi*’s download numbers.

It was quite natural for her to acknowledge me as a producer...so maybe I was wrong to find it weird she actually called me that.

“It’s great I take things so seriously, huh?”

“What are you talking about? Ah...” I was cut off by a buzzing from my pocket.

Mashiro noticed my reaction at once. “Go ahead and look. It’s from me.”

I checked the screen. I had a LIME message from Mashiro—which I checked. “Are these your thoughts on Eternaland? No, wait...”

The entire screen was buried beneath a wall of text. Text that exceeded the limits of one message, so it had been split up into several. There wasn’t a single emoji to be found, nor a single sticker. It was just text, text, and more text, as though it had come from a guy rather than a girl. There was so much of it that the screen was almost

pitch black.

It was too much to just be her reflections on our date. Actually, there was a word that described it much more accurately.

“Is this a report?”

“Yeah. I took notes on stuff I noticed, how the park influences where the visitors look and what they want to do, as well as the layout of that haunted house, and other details I thought might be useful for game design. How the characters were put to best use, and all sorts of other stuff. I took some photos of those things too, so I’ll send them over.” Mashiro reeled her spiel off like a proficient secretary, tapping away at her phone all the while.

“O-Oh. Thanks...?”

The phone in my hand buzzed over and over, physical proof of Mashiro’s accomplishments from today.

And then I realized something.

The whole day, there had been this serious expression on Mashiro’s face, and she’d been looking at her phone. It was like she wasn’t having any fun at all on our date, and I’d been worried it had something to do with the fact she’d put an end to our fake relationship.

“Mashiro... Is this...stuff...” I began.

“It’s for the console version of *Koyagi*. Home gaming is Tenchido’s bread and butter, right? So I’m sure most of what I got down is gonna be useful...”

“You did this for me?”

“Yeah. What else would we be here for?”

“Um, uh... I thought...we were on a date?”

“Huh?” Mashiro’s tone was ice cold.

I wish I’d brought a scarf.

“Well, y’know,” I said quickly, “I was thinking I’d use the class trip to *forget* about work and create some nice memories. And, um, I wasn’t thinking about work at all ’cause I was so busy looking at you the whole time...”

“Are you... I don’t believe this...” Her face red, Mashiro half rose to her feet. “Do you know how much thought I put into this? Trying to work out what would be best for you...and best for the Alliance! Because it was a lot!” She nearly shouted, and when she was done, she sank back down into her seat like the wind had been knocked from her sails.

Putting her head in her hands, she started muttering, “That’s why he was in a total daze today... After all the effort I put in today to help improve *Koyagi*... I just don’t get it... He’s always obsessing about work, but today he was actually paying more attention to *me*? Ugh...”

“I-I’m sorry.” I pocketed my phone again. It would be rude to hold

on to it and allow it to monopolize my eyes and attention, and I wanted to get across how grateful I truly was. “This is all really thoughtful of you, and I’m kinda blown away... Thanks, Mashiro.” Her actions had really warmed my heart.

Seeming a touch conflicted, Mashiro averted her gaze and shook her head. “I lied. I didn’t do this for you, Aki.”

“Huh?”

“Ghost Mansion was really inspirational. It successfully used only its appearance and atmosphere—not exposition—to get across to its visitors that they had strayed into a terrifying spiritual realm. The story was introduced as minimally as possible, with a simple explanation of the rules by a comedic character, who then met a devastating and dramatic end right before the entrance was sealed off. Your eye was naturally drawn to the path to follow, and on the way you encountered strategically placed ghosts and subtle props that only hinted at the inhabitants’ backstories—but it was enough to make you want to find out more.”

Mashiro continued. “The composition was just...perfect; they did a great job combining the principles of storytelling and game design. I think there are a lot of ideas there that could be adopted into *Koyagi*, a game set in a closed-off mansion with a constant link to infinite parallel worlds, that also manages to feel expansive.”

“You’ve really put a lot of thought into how this relates to the game, huh? You know a ton about *Koyagi* too...”

That much was clear from how fluently she spoke. It was the kind of fluency that was borne only of habitual thought.

So why was Mashiro thinking about this stuff so much? Was it because she was an aspiring author?

“You can’t make a great game if your scenario writer is writing in a void.”

“Scenario... Are you saying you’re gonna help with the game, Mashiro?!”

“No,” she said flatly.

“Figures...”

I don’t know what I expected. Not only did Mashiro have school, but she was writing her own story at the same time. There was no way she’d have the time to help with *Koyagi*’s scenarios on top of that. Though the reality of Makigai Namako-sensei, a popular author, helping us was even stranger, I supposed.

“I’m not *going* to help,” Mashiro said. “I’m already doing it.”

“Doing what?”

“The scenarios.”

“Huh? No, that would mean...”

My brain kicked into action to figure out the meaning behind

Mashiro's words. A number of possibilities sprang to mind. Canary, Makigai Namako-sensei's editor, had introduced Mashiro to him as an aspiring writer, and now Mashiro was assisting with the scenarios.

It made sense. Canary was editing for both of them, and once she learned Mashiro had ties to me, it would only be natural for her to bring the two together.

My body had frozen while I struggled to come up with a suitable answer, and then Mashiro opened her mouth impatiently.

Her gaze was deathly serious. I could see inexplicable beads of sweat on her forehead. Her expression was that of a criminal on a cliff edge at the end of a thriller movie, about to confess to being the grand mastermind behind everything.

"Makigai Namako is my pen name."

That's what she said.

Makigai Namako.

The unique pen name of a major author.

A writer of light novels who won first prize in a UZA Bunko competition for amateur writers. Though he only debuted recently, swathes of readers had fallen in love with his work, and he'd accumulated tons of fans. They said there would never be another like him in our time.

And now Mashiro was telling me that she was he.

"Ha ha ha! You looked so serious, I thought you were gonna come out with something massive! You're telling me *you're* Makigai Namako-sensei? C'mon, gimme a break." I waved a dismissive hand, like a housewife who'd just heard an absurd piece of gossip.

"...What?" Mashiro's face seemed to freeze over.

"It'd be a better joke if it were believable, y'know? I mean, Makigai Namako-sensei's a college student."

"That's...just something I said. It's not actually true."

"Canary-san never said anything about you two being the same person either."

"I asked her not to. I wanted it to be a secret."

"Also, he's a guy and you're a girl. Even if he does come off kinda androgynous."

"You've never seen his face, though, have you?"

"No, but I've heard his voice! And that's definitely the voice of a young, attractive guy, no matter how you spin it."

"You're committed to thinking I'm lying, aren't you? Fine! I've got a ton of proof I can show you!"

"M-Mashiro?"

She'd launched herself from her seat and had crawled forward until she was perched right between my legs.

"W-Wait, don't put your head there!"

“Don’t move. I won’t do anything weird.”

“Says every guy ever who’s about to do something weird! L-Look, Mashiro, just calm down, okay? We’re not old enough for this, so stop! Aaah!” I squirmed, trying to get away from both the girl who was practically clinging to the lower half of my body, and the implications. But we were in a cramped gondola. There was nowhere to run, and even moving too much could be dangerous. Like a village girl ambushed by bandits, there was nothing I could do.

What was Mashiro thinking? I never imagined she could be this wild! It must have been that rabid delinquent’s influence—Takamiya!

While my mind whirled with confused thoughts, the contents of my pants were pulled out. By which I mean the contents of my pocket.

“I’m borrowing this a sec.”

“Borrowing my...chastity?”

“Your phone. What, just because I’m down here, you’re thinking something dirty? Gross.” Mashiro glared at me, her eyes cold and unamused. In her hand was the very phone I’d put away so I could focus on our conversation. Clearly I’d jumped to the wrong conclusion. “Here, I’m gonna call you over LIME from my Makigai Namako account. Pick up, okay?”

“O-Okay... Hey!” As soon as I’d taken my phone back, Mashiro started lightly tapping at her own, and mine started to vibrate in my palm.

I was getting a call. From Makigai Namako.

I felt myself break out in an uncomfortable sweat. Then, I tapped the accept button with a trembling finger. And, treating it as gingerly as if it were a fragile object, I brought the phone slowly up to my ear.

“I get why you might not believe me, but it’s the truth. I’m Makigai Namako, dumbass.”

“I get why you might not believe me, but it’s the truth. I’m Makigai Namako, dumbass.”

As I listened to Mashiro’s voice from right in front of me, I heard the same words repeated in a smooth male tone in my ear, just a step behind her.

There was no mistaking that voice; I’d heard it countless times before. It was Makigai Namako-sensei.

“I use a voice changer. The recent apps for that kind of thing are really advanced. Though it was hard to find the right range in my own voice to make it sound natural...”

We were indeed in the era when female VTubers could in fact be male behind the screen. Flipping that technology and making a feminine voice sound masculine shouldn’t be difficult.

How had I not worked this out before?

Although, maybe it wasn’t as obvious as I thought. My encounter

with Makigai Namako-sensei came after a long string of coincidences. First, I just so happened to pick up that popular novel at the bookstore, then I just so happened to really like it, *then* I just so happened to send in some fan mail asking him to work with us, and after that he just so happened to reply.

How was I supposed to figure out he was actually the cousin I had hung out with all the time when we were little?



It was a truth equivalent to winning the lottery two years in a row, then pulling ten gacha cards in a mobile game only for eight of them to be SSRs. Either the odds were being fixed, or my luck would need to be rebalanced, and I'd be fatally hit by a car the next second I stepped into the road.

That was how unlikely this whole thing was—but there was a part of me that couldn't help but accept it. Especially when I looked back and saw all those pieces that finally fit into place.

Mashiro and Makigai Namako-sensei had never been at an Alliance party at the same time. More accurately, Makigai Namako-sensei used to speak at the parties via voice chat, but ever since Mashiro started coming, he switched to talking exclusively through text.

It was also strange that Canary took Mashiro on that trip to the country to force her to work on her manuscript. It made sense if she was a prizewinner who Canary was training, but what was the point in enforcing a deadline for an amateur writer so heavy-handedly? But if Mashiro was actually Makigai Namako-sensei, it all added up.

And that wasn't all.

If I *really* thought about it...I'd had my answer ever since the day Makigai Namako-sensei and I first made contact.

It happened a year ago—actually, at this point, it was more than a year and a half ago.

The very moment I opened up my email client and saw that name and that mail subject in my inbox, sweat erupted from every single pore on my body.

From: Makigai Namako (Author)

Subject: Your Fan Mail

My entire nervous system temporarily cut itself into shreds as it juggled the elation of getting a response with the anxiety that said response might be a rejection. If I'm being honest, the anxiety outweighed the elation just a little bit. By a ratio of nine to one.

Which was only natural, right? I'd never asked for help from a professional author before. And really, it was pure arrogance for a high schooler—who was only *just* a high schooler—to be making an offer like this out of the blue to a major author whose works sat on bookshelves across the entire country. I would be lucky enough if he found it endearing, as he gave a polite, professional response to turn me down.

The odds were stacked against me no matter how I spun it.

I could still remember clearly the way I gripped the mouse and

how I clicked on the email with a wobbly index finger.

From: Makigai Namako (Author)

Subject: Your Fan Mail

Dear Ooboshi Akiteru-sama,

It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Makigai Namako, an author whose works are published by UZA Bunko. I am getting in touch after seeing your message and contact details in your fan letter.

First, I'd like to thank you for your letter. Hearing how strongly you sympathized with all the characters and their nuances made me very happy, and it was greatly encouraging. There was a time when I was wondering whether it was worth it to keep on writing, but your letter helped me to be more optimistic about my work. Thank you, truly.

Now that the long introduction is out of the way, I wanted to let you know that I would be more than happy to help with your indie game, if you'll have me. There may be a lot of trial-and-error involved on my part, as I have never written for a video game before, but I promise to give it my all. If this is something you would have me work with you on for the long term, all the better.

If there was a god, his name was Makigai Namako-sensei.

I was happy enough to have received a polite response, but I never thought he'd actually agree to work with me!

I'm not exaggerating when I say I started yelling, "I did it! Heck yeah! Woo!" loudly, and slid on my knees in the center of the room with my arms in the air, leaning back like a soccer player who'd just scored a goal.

What was I, a kid?

It must've been muscle memory. I used to make that pose a lot when I was little, playing with Mashiro and her older brother. I remember they were broadcasting the World Cup on TV, and though it's cringey to admit, us two boys were easily influenced. We copied that pose over and over, completely running it into the ground.

Eventually, Mashiro got brainwashed—sorry, influenced—too, and started making the same pose whenever something good happened, or she accomplished something big.

Anyway, I was absolutely over the moon when Makigai Namako-sensei became the Alliance's scenario writer. There was more to it than the attention we'd gain from having the name of a famous author on the project (though that was cause for celebration—*big* cause for celebration).

I'd always related strongly to the male lead in Makigai Namako-sensei's novel, the one who was always by the main girl's side. It was like his very existence affirmed everything about my life: everything I'd ever held dear, and everything I was trying to do.

It was all the more important to me, because it all came at a time

I was wavering.

I was obsessing over anxious questions: Was I right to be doing what I was for Ozu's sake? Wasn't I just interfering where I shouldn't be? Wasn't I just sending him on a one-way ride to hell?

And then this character came along, and told me I was on the right path.

How could I not have been touched by that?

I can say this now, without a doubt.

That day, at the very moment I read that message, I fell in love with the author known as Makigai Namako.

"Aki?"

"Hm? O-Oh, sorry. I'm back."

"Right..."

I'd fallen totally silent while reminiscing; I must have worried Mashiro. She was awkwardly staring at the floor.

"I'm sorry for lying to you all this time, Aki."

"D-Don't call it lying. You've done so much for us, Makigai-sensei, and I don't consider what you did to be dishonest at all!"

"Don't talk to me like I'm your idol. It's creepy."

"O-Oh, uh, right, sorry, Maki—Mashiro." My words came out so janky, it was almost laughable, like my throat had suddenly rusted over. In my head I could see two blurry silhouettes of the person in front of me overlapping. One was Tsukinomori Mashiro, and the other was Makigai Namako, but no matter what I did, those silhouettes refused to merge neatly. I didn't know who I was looking at anymore. My mind was fuzzy, but I managed to squeeze out a question: "Why'd you hide it all this time?"

"I couldn't tell you. The novels I write... They're like a direct window into my mind."

"But I love those novels."

"I know," Mashiro replied, almost immediately. "That's exactly why I couldn't say anything."

"I don't get it..."

"I didn't want you to be disillusioned by the truth. I mean, it wouldn't be fair."

"How so?"

"Remember what you said to me in that cinema, right after I transferred to our school? You said you really sympathized with Makigai Namako's work."

"Yeah... I meant it too."

We'd had a run-in with Mashiro's former bullies, and she'd hidden away in a cinema screening a B movie. There, I'd waxed lyrical about

how great Makigai Namako-sensei's work was. I was using it as an example to cheer up Mashiro, who was down because those bullies had made fun of her for writing her own story.

Though, now that I knew I had been grinning and fawning over her own work right in front of her, I wanted to die of embarrassment.

"It's no wonder it resonated with you," Mashiro said. "Because I put all the stuff I admire about you in there."

I stared at her in surprise—but what she'd said was perfectly logical. Obviously the book was going to click with me on a deep, emotional level. After all, it was written by somebody who knew so much about me. It was overwhelmingly simple, like the kind of twist at the end of a mystery book that only made the reader mad.

"Hearing how strongly you sympathized with all the characters and their nuances made me very happy to hear, and it was greatly encouraging."

Over a year later, and the hidden meaning behind that once-throwaway line was suddenly clear to me.

Why should an author be "very happy" to know some random reader sympathized with their characters? At the time, I was so ecstatic he'd accepted my offer, the strangeness of that line hadn't stuck out to me at all.

Seriously... Sometimes I wish I weren't so dense.

"I know you've already said it, but I wanna ask you again," I said.

"Go ahead."

"You're Makigai Namako-sensei. Aren't you?"

"I am." She didn't hesitate for even a second, and her gaze didn't waver as she looked me right in the eye.

I knew for sure then.

Mashiro wasn't a good liar, especially when it came to a lie of this scale. She wasn't the type to come up with an elaborate joke to tease someone either.

"Okay. I got it."

The full-blown realization caught up to me the moment I said that. Once that happened, my chest was filled to bursting with a sudden myriad of emotions.

I'd met Makigai Namako-sensei in the flesh. I remembered—there was something I'd always wanted to do if I ever met him.

I heard Mashiro gasp in surprise. At some point without realizing it, I'd taken her hand in both of mine. Pressing my forehead tight against her hand, I let out everything that I'd been storing up inside me for so, so long.

"Thank you...so much! I've always wanted to tell you how grateful I am...in person."

"Huh? Wait, Aki... Are you...crying?"

“No!”

My eyes *did* feel a little hot, and my cheeks *did* feel slightly damp, but I didn’t actually *see* a teenage boy crying like a wimpy little kid around here, so it was safe to say that wasn’t what was happening. Perhaps it was because my emotions were so unstable at the moment that Mashiro’s gaze seemed extra kind to me, filled with a strong affection.

“I wasn’t expecting this. I rarely see you getting so emotional,” she said.

“I’ve always wanted to thank you,” I repeated. “It’s because of you that *Koyagi* is played by so many people, and that the Alliance is in such a strong position to negotiate in the adult world. It’s because of you that the path we walk isn’t so hazy... That it’s not a dead end, but a smooth, paved road that’s actually going somewhere.”

“Aki...”

“I had to make *Koyagi* big, no matter what. I was reckless. I took the whole team’s lives onto my frail shoulders, and I was gonna break... I was on the verge of throwing in the towel...but then you reached out to me. Without you, everything could’ve ended.”

“I...didn’t know...”

“You gotta laugh, right? I remember when I saw you again. You were so small, so frail, so delicate... I had this urgent sense I needed to help you, to support you. And then it turns out you’re the one who saved me all along. It makes me wonder which of us helped the other out more, y’know?”

“Don’t say that. I’d be lost without you. I know I helped you out a ton as Makigai Namako, but it’s nothing compared to all the stuff you’ve done for me. And I’m not about to let you say otherwise.”

“Yeah, I know, it’s just... Mashiro?”

She’d started to giggle—and I couldn’t work out what there was to laugh about. I thought we were having a pretty serious conversation myself.

“Sorry, it’s just all so funny. The Alliance’s members are really special to you, right? All this time I’ve been talking with you online, I never realized how much you actually cared.”

“O-Of course they are...”

What with the rise of social media and video meeting platforms these days, it was normal to communicate with people without ever meeting them face-to-face. But even now, there was a surprisingly high amount of information you could only pick up on by seeing someone’s face and hearing their voice. It was only then, too, that you could feel their warmth as a fellow human being.

I bet it sounds weird for someone so obsessed with efficiency to hold such old-fashioned values, huh?

Even then, I was far more comfortable communicating in the flesh than by any other method.

“I wish I’d told you earlier then,” Mashiro said. “If only so I could’ve found out how deeply you cared.”

“Yeah, you should’ve! D’you know how much I was *dying* to meet Makigai-sensei? I... Well, I guess I already *had* met him. Y’know, you could’ve told me, and I wouldn’t have batted an... I would’ve batted several eyelashes, actually, but there’s no way I would’ve been disillusioned!”

I was confident enough in who Makigai Namako-sensei was to me that he could have been anybody and my feelings wouldn’t have changed. The only thing that changed was that I now had an added respect for Mashiro herself.

“So then, why did you pick today—and right now—to tell me the truth?”

“Well...”

She hadn’t said anything before because she’d been too scared. Flipping that phrasing around, it meant something had gotten rid of that fear, since she was now being open with me—but it seemed a little hasty to jump to a conclusion like that one.

“I know there were other girls who were completely upfront with you, and I started to think of myself as cowardly for relying on a safety net...”

“Other girls... Do you mean Mido—”

Mashiro placed a finger on my lips to cut me off, and with a prick of guilt, I quickly realized why. It didn’t matter how much Mashiro knew about Midori’s confession from last night; bringing it up now—confirming it had happened—would be pretty insensitive.

“As long as I had my alter ego to hide behind, I could stay with you for as long as I wanted, even if you rejected me. But doing that wouldn’t be fair to the other girls who are interested in you, and it definitely wouldn’t be fair to you, when you give absolutely everything to the Alliance. That’s why I wanted to come clean.”

“Is that also why you ‘broke up’ with me?”

“Yes. I want the whole Alliance to know the truth. I don’t want to hide anything anymore, and I don’t want to be in a fake relationship with you. That way, I can make a fresh start.”

“But wait, doesn’t that mean...”

I suddenly had a sense of foreboding.

Tsukinomori-san was a world-class CEO. He wouldn’t relax the conditions of our deal for nothing. My fake relationship with Mashiro and the Alliance’s entry into Honeyplace Works were inextricably linked. If our fake relationship was off, that would mean a change in how the Alliance was handled.

I had no idea what sort of conditions Tsukinomori-san would be willing to accept, but there was a pretty simple conclusion I could draw now that I knew Mashiro's secret identity.

"Wait, don't say you used your LN series as a bargaining chip?"

"I did," Mashiro admitted readily. "I gave Honeyplace Works permission to create new media based on *Snow White's Revenge Classroom*. I've already got Canary-san on board too; it's a done deal."

"Are you sure about this? There has to be a pretty strong reason you didn't want it getting an anime up till now. Like it went against your values or something."

"It wasn't anything to do with values. I was...scared. Scared to let someone else take control over the story that came from inside me, and scared to expose that story to even more people than would ever read the novels."

"Then you don't have to do this!"

"I've already made up my mind. And I'm prepared to get bigger—to become famous. If you achieve your goals, you're gonna be famous too, right, Aki?"

"Uh..."

I had thought about this. Creating a polished console game and letting Honeyplace Works publish it meant taking on the world. If making something that only had to please our limited core fan base were enough to satisfy me, there would have been no need for me to step into the console market. In that case, we just needed to continue to create new content for our mobile app's current player base indefinitely.

But because I aimed beyond that, I needed to do more. All this time, my main goal was to expand the environment in which Ozu, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, and Iroha could make use of their talents. Entering the console market was one of the surest ways I'd come up with.

"I'm gonna make it big too," Mashiro continued. "I'm gonna expose myself to the masses, and get criticized and bashed like never before. I've probably got a lot of hurt ahead of me. But I'm ready to take all of it, if it means I can keep walking by your side."

"Mashiro... No, Makigai Namako-sensei... That's such a major step..."

I was encouraged by what she was telling me, and it made me realize I couldn't rely on her forever either. I needed to work hard for the future too.

"It's not me, Aki. You're the one who inspired this. I'm moving forward because of you, and everything you've done for me. It's the same for all of us in the Alliance."

I considered her words. "I see..."

Mashiro's eyes were shining with an almost blinding light as she fixed them on mine. It only enhanced the muddy guilt settling deep in my chest.

"I'm sorry, Mashiro."

"Sorry? I thought I was the one apologizing here."

"I'm apologizing because you've just opened up your heart to me and told me everything...but there's still something I'm hiding from you."

Mashiro flinched.

I'd been wondering whether it was a good idea to tell her or not, and in the end, I decided I could trust Mashiro. And so I handed over the Alliance's greatest, final secret. I opened up Pandora's box and showed her the contents.

"I've been hiding this from everyone in the Alliance for a long time, but the truth is...our mystery voice actor is Iroha."

Mashiro didn't say anything.

"You don't seem surprised."

"I'm not. Because I already knew."

"Okay. Well, I guess it makes sense you figured it out. Like, I don't have any friends outside of the Alliance, yet she's always coming over to my place. Then there's the fact she knows everything about what we do, and she has enough acting skills to coach the drama club... It'd be weirder to think the Phantom Voice Troupe could be anybody else."

"Those are all good points, but...I'm sorry. I accidentally saw a LIME message Otoi-san sent you on your phone. It was in the car when we were on the way back from that trip, and everyone else was asleep. I-I wanna be clear it really wasn't on purpose...but I still saw it, so...sorry."

"No, it's fine. It's something I need to share with the rest of the Alliance anyway. And it's not like you told anyone else either."

"Why were you keeping it a secret?"

"Because there's someone who absolutely can't find out, no matter what."

"Do you mean..."

"Iroha's mom: Kohinata Otoha. Also known as Amachi Otoha. The CEO of Tenchido, the woman who runs Eternaland."

"Her? Why would it be so bad if she found out?"

We were sealed away in a ferris wheel, just the two of us. An airborne locked room where we engaged in a confidential conversation. It was the kind of place an evil organization might negotiate a backroom deal—but the shadow we were traversing wasn't unlawfulness. It was the past.

"In order to explain, I'm gonna have to go way back to before you

and me reunited—actually, further than that: before you even got in touch with me as Makigai Namako-sensei.”

“Lemme hear it.”

“Okay, okay. You don’t have to lean forward like that, y’know.” I pulled back from her a little, not expecting her to be so eager.

Still, I could also see where that eagerness came from. Something I wouldn’t have been able to appreciate before. Something I wouldn’t have been able to appreciate without understanding my own romantic feelings.

Of course Mashiro would be interested in my past and, by extension, how I got close to Iroha, who I was sure she saw as competition. I wanted to protect Iroha’s secret, but not enough to shun Mashiro.

“My junior high school years were majorly cringe,” I said, “so I’d made it a rule not to even think about them.”

Now, though, I had made up my mind.

There was a reason I was so determined to keep Iroha’s secret. Then there was the story of our meeting, our getting to know each other, and the formation of the 05th Floor Alliance, and how it became what it is today.

I’d fed bits and pieces of the safer parts of those stories to various people over time, but right now, I felt I had a duty to tell Mashiro the whole, unadulterated truth.

So I opened up that box of memories. That second Pandora’s box that held nothing but embarrassment.

“Back then...I stole something really important from Iroha.”

“He’s really gonna leave it hanging *there*?! That’s such a dirty trick! Now I *really* wanna know what’s coming next!”

“I know what you really think.”

“I *love* it! Now I get to speculate on all kinds of possibilities, and I’m so hyped!”

“It’s that imagination that makes you such an impressive creative, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei.”

“Hey, d’you think it’s cool if I draw fan art of what I think Aki and Iroha-chan’s past was like?!”

“I’m gonna be showing up in this one too, by the way.”

“Seriously?! Wait, so there’s gonna be a love triangle with you, Aki, and Iroha-chan?! That’s gonna make my job way more complicated!”

“Otoi-san’s gonna be showing up in this one too, by the way.”

“I’m doomed!”

“Aha ha ha. It’ll be interesting to see how accurate your

predictions are, eh?”

Interlude: Iroha and Otoha

I picked up the requested water and cream soda (and a tomato juice for myself) at the stand, then hurried back over to Ghost Mansion. I was way later than I should've been; my trip through the haunted house and reuniting with Senpai and Mashiro-senpai took up a huge chunk of time. I didn't think Mizuki-san would be mad at me for being late, but that didn't stop me feeling guilty about it.

Otoi-san, though... Yeah, she was probably mad.

She wouldn't actually shout at me, but I could hear her saying "You're late..." in a quiet tone, with a blank expression on her face.

It ended up being a lot easier to get into Ghost Mansion than it had been leaving it, mainly because I ran into a staff member past the back entrance who showed me to the room the Hollywood crew was using.

"Have you got any proof you are with them, such as a guest pass?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I do!" For a second, I didn't know what she was on about, but then I remembered, and I started going through my pocket. I fished out the sticker with "guest" written on it. "It's this, right?"

"Yes, that's right. I'll show you the way."

And she did, leading me right up to the door.

"If you wouldn't mind, could you place that sticker on your shoulder, or somewhere else on your clothing so it's easier to see?"

"Oh, right! Yeah, I'll do that!" I laughed awkwardly.

I knew it was better to stick it on me somewhere, but I was worried about it damaging the material of my clothing. Especially since I'd picked out the most stylish clothes I had for this once-in-a-blue-moon trip. And, like, I could just pull out that sticker whenever I needed to, so it's not like it had to live on my shoulder the whole time.

Sorry, ma'am, but I just told you a little white lie!

With that, I started to push through the half-open door with my shoulder. I picked up on some voices coming from inside.

"Tenchido really is wonderful. I do so admire your work."

"Oh, I am so honored to receive such a comment."

Was there a meeting going on in there?

I couldn't understand anything because it was all in English, but

things sounded just a little too stiff for a casual chat.

I didn't want to interrupt anything, so I slid silently through the door and slipped over to the corner, where Mizuki-san and Otoi-san were sitting in two chairs with a calculated distance between them.

"Thank vous." Mizuki-san took her water. "My throat is dry. This saves me."

"Thanks," Otoi-san said, wasting no time slurping at her cream soda.

"At least take it outta my hand before you start drinking!" I said.

"Liftin' my arms up is effort. Mm, 'sgood."

I literally couldn't think of anything lazier than making someone else hold your drink while you sucked it up through the straw. Otoi-san was a force to be reckoned with.

"Urgh... I can't believe you never get sick of sweet things either, Otoi-san."

Just then, I felt a tap on my shoulder, and turned to see Mizuki-san.

"Iroha-chan. Is there not something you noticed?"

"Uh... What am I supposed to be noticing?" I cocked my head at her.

Mizuki-san's eyes narrowed just a touch. It was hard to work out if she was trying to test me on something or if she was playing a joke on me—but I was weirdly reminded of a black panther.

"Oh? Could that be my darling little Iroha-chan over there?"

...*What?*

I froze up.

I couldn't see her—Mizuki-san was in the way—but I knew she was there. I knew that voice, and I knew the way she addressed me as "Iroha-chan." It was an affectionate voice that I'd been used to since the very day I was born.

"Oh dear. Oh dearie, dearie me. I didn't want my daughter to see me here... What exactly is the meaning of this?"

"M-Mom?"

How could I not have seen her? If I had, I could've been a million miles away by now.

Among the participants in the English conversation was a foreign man, probably the director. Next to him was my mom, in a suit—something I would never have seen her wear around the house. She was in total business mode.

Kohinata Otoha. Otherwise known as Amachi Otoha.

Her eyes were usually gentle and kept almost closed, but right now they were at least half-open—and she was walking right towards me.

What now? She's gonna flip her lid...

But she didn't shout, and she didn't make any accusations. Instead, she just looked at me, her eyes sad; disappointed. I couldn't look back at her for long, and it felt like there was this heavy stone at the pit of my stomach. Not able to do anything else, I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Hold up... Don't tell me this lady's... Damn."

I felt Otoi-san stiffen—just slightly—nearby me. She knew I had to hide my acting aspirations from my mom, but she didn't know mom was the CEO of Tenchido. And, of course, she didn't know what mom looked like either.

There was no way she could have known that woman was my mom, and I knew if she'd realized it, she would've contacted me right away.

But she hadn't. This was probably it for me.

I was with the film crew for a Hollywood movie. Coming up with an excuse for that was impossible. Only someone who wanted to set foot in the entertainment world would be doing something like this.

I heard mom's footsteps stop right in front of me. Thinking about what she might be about to say had me trembling.

"What is the meaning of this...Mizuki-san?"

Wait... She's not talking to me?

"Are you really telling me you managed to take somebody else's daughter out of school on a weekday and drag her all the way to Kyoto?"

"She is a teenager. Independent and mature. There is no problem."

"But you *do* realize she is a minor in the eyes of the law, and that you require parental consent to make her work, *don't* you?"

"There is no pay. Zero yen an hour. She is a volunteer, so there is okay."

"That in itself raises a host of other legal questions."

Mom and Mizuki-san smiled politely at each other, invisible fireworks going off between them. Mom wasn't angry at me; she was angry at the adult who brought me here. And she was mad because she was worried about me. That was something I recognized as positive in my mom.

But—and maybe this was *because* I knew it was a good thing—I never managed to speak up for myself in these situations.

"Iroha-chan."

Now she was addressing me.

"Y-Yes?" I shot up straight, my words coming out stilted.

"Why did you come here? You know skipping school is naughty."

"I'm...I'm sorry, I just..."

"You just...what?"

"Uh..."

She pushed, and I was backed up against the wall. I was struggling to get out what I wanted to say, and I knew I was shrinking back without needing to look in a mirror to prove it. I tried to take a step back, but then I felt something soft around my shoulders keeping me in place.

“Non. Running is bad. It cannot go.”

“Mizuki-san? But I can’t...”

“It’s a good opportunity. Your chance. There are necessary times to tell things assertively. What do you want to do? Tell your real feelings.”

“Wait, did you *know* mom was—”

“Oui. Of course I know. I had the knowledge. I prepared this place for you to take a step and break your shell. Now I push your back.”

“No way...”

This whole thing—every last part of it—was something cooked up entirely by Mizuki-san.

It was obvious if I stopped to think about it rationally. This was a Hollywood film crew. The theme park wasn’t just going to send some random staff member to greet them. It was a big deal that required someone way higher up the chain: the CEO herself. I bet Mizuki-san had the life experience to have seen this coming.

Forcing me into this position was horrifically unfair. At least, that was how I wanted to feel, but I knew it was unreasonable.

I had to face mom at some point. I couldn’t hide behind Senpai or my anonymity forever. That was always going to end the moment I was out of high school—the moment I needed to start living as an adult. If I wanted to start down the path of a professional actress, I needed to confront mom head-on and persuade her.

“The feelings of what you saw today, with Hollywood, and with a professional film set. Ask your heart. There is the answer.”

Mizuki-san was right.

At the filming in Gion, I witnessed how Tsukinomori Mizuki shined as an actress. I’d seen *real* acting out there, enhanced by the high level of professionalism from every member of the film crew, and it had blown my mind. It made me want to get into acting more than ever—to devote literally everything I had to my dream.

“After, you only need to let out courage. So go and say it. To your mom.”

The answer couldn’t be any clearer. And I could do it now. I could look mom right in the eye and declare to her what it was I wanted to do.

“Mom. I...”

I gathered up every ounce of pure emotion I had, and opened my mouth. I was ready to speak, in a clear, firm voice.

Then I watched as a quiet sheen of sadness took over mom's eyes.



“I...” A decrescendo kicked in. My voice started getting quieter and quieter. “I...” It then turned hoarse, before reaching inaudible levels. And then it dissipated all together.

“Iroha-chan?” I heard Mizuki-san’s confused tone just behind my ear—but I might have just imagined it. Either way, her words never processed in my mind.

Senpai had given me his full support. An A-list Hollywood actress had even done me a huge favor. But even then, I was too pathetic to gather up the pride I needed to rebel against my mother.

I’d probably have to give up on my dream. I was probably about to ruin everything Senpai and I had built up together. And I was terrified.

One emotion would rise up inside me only to fade away and be replaced by another, over and over.

My head was a mess.

So I made a decision.

“Hey! Kohinata!”

“Iroha-chan?!”

By the time they called out to me, I was too far away for them to do anything. I was already on my way out the door when Otoi-san and Mizuki-san realized what was happening. Even I was surprised by how fast my body had moved. I’d ducked my head down and kept it there, not taking in any of my surroundings. I’d turned my back to mom and everyone else in that room. I’d run away.

This was my answer.

I’m sorry, Senpai. I’m sorry, Otoi-san. I’m sorry, Mizuki-san.

All of them had done so much to support me. They’d accepted my selfish desires.

But those selfish desires stopped short the moment I was forced to face my mom.

Interlude: Mizuki and Otoi-san

Bon evening. This is Tsukinomori Mizuki.

I'm a very ordinary Broadway actress, with one French and one Japanese parent. If there is something that sets me the tiniest bit apart from others, it's that I am blessed with a beloved husband and children.

At the moment I'm in Kyoto, Japan, for two very simple reasons. Firstly, I was offered a part in a musical by a Hollywood film crew based on my Broadway work, and secondly, it sounded fun, so I accepted it.

Recently, too, I'd discovered a young, talented girl, full of potential. I wanted to lend her a hand and encourage her, but unfortunately things didn't go to plan.

I knew *why* her mother, Amachi Otoha, was trying to stop her from entering the world of acting. However, her mother was one person, and she was another. For Otoha-san to place such restrictions on her daughter's life was unjustified, and there was no reason determination couldn't trump misfortune.

It was perfectly natural for a teenage daughter to experience insecurity and hide things from her mother. I'd always seen it like this: eventually she would make up her mind, fly from her parents' nest, and begin making her own life.

I'd raised Mashiro following this principle too. She'd started walking her own path. Then, when she got hurt and locked herself away, I decided I would do my best to support her mentally without going so far as to meddle. I would watch over her, without pushing, until she was ready to stand up again by herself.

You had to pick your own path in life. I'd done that, and I wanted Mashiro to do the same. With my eldest, Mikoto, I had regrettably done too little, which is how he ended up where he is now.

That was where I had been coming from, and that was why, when I watched Iroha-chan fly out of the room, my mind froze and I could only watch her go with my mouth gaping open like a fool.

"I hope you're happy."

I jumped as I felt a strong grip on my shoulders, and instinctively grimaced. Glaring at me was the high school student, here on her class trip, who'd joined our little troupe partway. If I remembered correctly, her name was Otoi-san. I could feel her seething, something I never

would have thought possible of the sloth-like girl sipping lazily at her cream soda. Her eyes held the sharpness of one who had killed many, whether demon, soldier, or assassin.

“We’re goin’ after her. You’re helpin’.”

“Y-Yes... I am worried...worrying too. She can’t go lost.”

“Yup.” Otoi-san sucked hard on her straw, downing the entire remainder of her cream soda in a split second. She must have had the lung capacity of a fearsome beast. Crushing the plastic cup in her grip, she threw it towards the trashcan and landed a perfect three-pointer before racing from the room.

Just before I followed, I turned to Otoha-san. “You don’t go?”

“No... I have a feeling I’m the last person she wants to see right now.”

“If you know everything, why do you not accept her?”

“Do I really have to explain myself? This has nothing to do with you. And you have chosen a path drastically different from mine.”

I felt a high, invisible wall between us. I knew anything else I said would be wasted effort, fall on deaf ears, and make no difference.

I turned my back to her, but I wanted to leave her with one last cutting remark.

“You hold on to the past. You hold it over another person’s life. That is how the adults you hate work.”

“Yes. I’m well aware of that,” Otoha-san snapped back.

If she was going to fight back, there was no more meaning in my saying something anymore.

I ran after Otoi-san from the room.

I caught up with Otoi-san just before she went down some stairs. We asked a staff member passing by for information on Iroha-chan, worked out the direction she was running, and then we were able to estimate her course. It sounded like she had left Ghost Mansion and gone outside.

“Ugh. Runnin’ ’round all over the place sure is a pain.”

“I think the same. I thought I could become an adult, a lovely lady, and just sit for all my life. Sweating, breathing badly, it is for teenagers.”

“I wish they sold shoes that took y’to wherever y’wanted while y’slept, y’know?”

“There would be no exercise. You would be fat very quickly. It’s dangerous.”

I didn’t know if she understood what I was saying or not, but while we quarreled, we made it outside. When we ran, I looked at Otoi-san to ask her a question.

“Otoi-san. You know a lot about Iroha-san. You are a wise person about her. I’m not wrong?”

“I guess I know some stuff.”

“I thought, even if they are against each other, or their values are not the same, a parent and child can understand each other if they talk. Because it’s family. It is naive and shallow and too much ideals. Now I’m embarrassed. I’m sorry.”

“You should be. You really stuck your nose in.”

“I know very well about Ootoa-san. I have confidence. But about her relationship with her daughter, I’m a beginner. A virgin. I have not enough knowledge.”

“You’re an actress. I thought you’d get it.”

“What does this mean?”

“Kohinata understands other people’s emotions *too* well.”

“I see. From her ability to completely become a role, yes?”

It took me less than a second to know what she meant. There were some talented actresses out there whose roles seemed to possess them like a spirit. I was one of them, and when it came to that level of immersion in a role, I knew Iroha-chan experienced it much more deeply than me. And also, much more cruelly.

It was Iroha-chan’s talent, but also her weakness. I wanted to guide her, because I sensed that the role she played lacked a lot of who she really was, and that it was a waste.

“But even then, going this far is abnormal, isn’t it? Even if you are understanding well your mother’s feelings and empathizing, there are always things you want to do yourself. Can people become this selfless?”

“You stupid or somethin’?”

“Oh... A very blunt blow.”

Her harsh response was actually refreshing. Being an actress, I was always surrounded by people careful of my mood, being humble, sycophantic, and sometimes sparing with the truth. They built me an echo chamber where my ego would grow and grow. It’s hard to choose the right words in Japanese, but I think it is clear what I want to say.

What I mean is, it felt good to hear Otoi-san be so frank with me. No one else had dared in a long time.

“Me ’n’ Aki’d have a way easier time of stuff if Kohinata weren’t like this.”

“‘Aki’...a familiar way to call him. I feel the meaning is deep.”

“I guess. I’ve known him for ages. Since junior high.”

“A deep relationship with Ooboshi-kun. Hmm. Friends with benefits. An ex-girlfriend. Or one-night standing?”

“Nah, none of those. Though thinkin’ about it, I guess y’could say

it's somethin' similar."

"Oh. Yes, lots of new impulses in puberty. It can be dirty."

"Like I said, it's nothin' like *that*."

I had my hands clasped to my cheeks and was squirming with excitement when Otoi-san hit my head with a karate chop and cracked my skull. But that is a metaphor, of course. I need to stop playing around now.

My seriousness levels were getting closer and closer to zero, so I pulled them up to about thirty percent.

"Is it good, or possible for me to ask in detail?"

"Uh... I mean, I don't really wanna think 'bout those days." Otoi-san pursed her lips, and because of the principle of leverage, the lollipop stick in her mouth pointed upward. Her eyes softened like she was looking at a place far away, and then she continued. "He's got talent, but it's more than that. It was 'cause of that same talent that he turned so tragic... 'n' he didn't even realize."

Epilogue: Murasaki Shikibu-sensei Gets Her Precious Turn

That one day in the class trip when the students get to go off and do whatever they want is a welcome day of rest for your lazy, indoorsy teachers. They don't even have to step outside the hotel if they don't wanna!

Up till now, when the itinerary was mostly fixed, we teachers had to take up various posts along the routes and keep our eyes peeled for trouble. Not so today. As long as we had our phones constantly at the ready in case of emergencies, we could spend our time wherever we wanted—provided we didn't stray *too* far from the hotel.

Which basically meant nobody could complain if I stayed in the hotel the whole day. It was too perfect!

And the cherry on top: the other teachers were either in their rooms or had gone out somewhere in the area. None of them were in the first floor lounge.

They were probably avoiding the lounge. There were a lot of other guests here apart from our students, so the place wasn't exactly empty. Which only made things more convenient for me, Kageishi Sumire—alias Murasaki Shikibu-sensei! Pah ha ha ha!

There was nothing to stop me now from carrying out my very secret, very private business!

“Pfft... Heh heh heh...”

“Whaddya grinnin’ about? You never get any less creepy, I swear...”

“Heh heh... Gah?!” I started choking—not on a drink, but on my own spit—as I was suddenly addressed in a thick Kansai accent. “How long have you been sitting there?!”

“Only a little while. I heard ya became a teacher. Thought it might’ve made ya seem more mature, but nope, ya haven’t changed a bit.”

A woman with glasses and distinctive frizzy hair sat across from me, giggling at my reaction. Though her clothes gave off an air of sophistication like any other adult woman, there were tiny clues that belied a lack of self-esteem—like the lack of color in them, or the pastiness of her skin. It was obvious that she had been an unsociable type before her debut in the working world.

She might have been fooling everyone else, but there was no way

she could fool me! Even if that was only because I *knew* what she was like before she started working!

“Waaah! I missed you, Nago-chan!” I leaned over the table in front of us to give her a hug.

“H-Hey! Quit it! Ya can’t start clingin’ to me in a classy lounge like this!” Nago-chan shoved my face back. It was kinda rude of her, if I was honest. Though I guess the fact that she could treat me like this just proved that we were super close. “Jeez. Ya always look so unassumingly pretty, y’know? But ya sure don’t act like it!”

“You’re one to talk! It’s so weird seeing you without a sword strapped to your back!”

“Of course I ain’t walkin’ round like *that*! Ya ever seen someone cosplayin’ outside of an event? And stop callin’ me Nago-chan. My full username is Dainagon Kimiko, Learned Chief Councillor!”

“I can’t say all that! I’ll bite my tongue!”

“Then, if yer gonna call me Nago-chan, I should be allowed to call ya Saki-chan!”

“What?! But that sounds like a normal name! No one’s ever gonna be able to work that back to Murasaki Shikibu-sensei!”

“Ya sure are demandin’, huh? But fine, let’s go with Shikibu-san.”

“It’s been ages since I’ve heard you say my name—and it feels like ages since I’ve said yours. I’m sorry for calling you over on such short notice!”

“It’s no biggie. It’s not like I had anythin’ better to do with my lunch break than, y’know, eat lunch. Only difference is where I’m eatin’ it—and whether that’s here or near work ain’t a huge difference at all. We haven’t seen each other much either, what with it bein’ a while since our circle’s published anythin’. It’s been kinda lonely, y’know?”

“No way! *You*, cool-as-a-cucumber Nago-chan, have been feeling lonely?! Can you say ‘gap moe’?!”

“I was kiddin’, obviously! Of course I wasn’t lonely!”

“Plus one for being a tsundere on top of that!”

“If ya wanna get to my soft insides, it’s gonna cost ya. How’s ten billion ten thousand yen sound?” Nago-chan snickered.

That exchange pretty much summed up our relationship.

We’d known each other since college, and she was one of the few people who knew about and shared my geeky interests. Back when I was drawing doujinshi under the name Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, she would help me sell them at events. That was Nago-chan—or Dainagon Kimiko, Learned Chief Councillor.

After graduation, I got a job teaching in Kanto, while Nago-chan got a job in Kansai, working in game development.

“How’s Tenchido treating you then?” I asked. “I bet it’s paradise!”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s what everybody thinks. From the outside, it looks like a happy little company where sales never fall and nothin’ ever goes wrong, right?”

“What, so it’s not like that?”

“Nope. It’s got its ups and downs, y’see. Did I tell ya I work in UI design?”

“You did, yeah. Back when we had that party to celebrate our successful job hunting.”

When I thought back to all the stuff Nago-chan got up to in college, her position suited her perfectly. She was a cosplayer, knew her way around a few graphic design programs (which came in handy when she helped with my art), and studied programming as a hobby too.

By the way, UI stands for user interface. It takes some solid knowledge to create a UI that allows for a pleasant gaming experience. Options need to be properly visible, and you need to know how to guide the player’s line of sight, among other things.

When people talk about a finished game, they usually focus on the work of the producers, the directors, the character designers, the composers, the writers...but the truth is, the UI often has an equally important role in the gaming experience.

Oh, and *Koyagi*’s UI is something Aki, Ozuma-kun, and I all work on together by pooling our various knowledge.

“So I’ve been workin’ on the UI for this one project recently, right? It’s a collaboration with another company. That company usually just makes social network games, and one of their engineers is a real pain. Basically, all the programming we did for the UI got completely destroyed.”

“Yikes.”

“So I’m askin’ a ton of questions, and it turns out this guy’s got, like, zero experience. He’s on their team, but he’s never actually *done* anythin’, and apparently he changes careers like it’s his underwear. Yet he talks and lords it over us like he’s God’s gift to gamin’! I literally lost it like I haven’t done in years!”

“Yowch. I guess Tenchido isn’t all sunshine and roses—not that this guy works for Tenchido.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t. And that’s the only thing that’s good about him. The guys who actually work for Tenchido are fine. Our CEO wouldn’t let anybody throw their weight around like he does.”

“Your CEO? Oh, you mean Amachi-san?”

“Yup! And she’s not just a pretty face either! She knows how to run a company like no one else. She’s actually super awesome!”

I had shared a drink with Amachi-san just recently. I couldn’t believe an amazing woman like her was Iroha-chan’s mom, *and* my

neighbor. It made me realize it really is a small world.

I decided not to let Nago-chan in on that info for now. She probably wouldn't react very well if she found out I knew her boss on a more personal level.

"Apparently, Amachi-san used her own influence to get this blockhead reshuffled within his own company too. I could literally fall in love with this woman, she's so amazing."

"Whoa..."

A shiver ran up my spine, even though the situation had nothing to do with me. I was sure getting rid of a worthless employee made her a hero in some people's eyes, but I could also imagine myself being at the wrong end of her wrath, and it was majorly terrifying. Like, what would she do to me if I missed a deadline?

I decided then and there I could never work for Tenchido.

"Well, Tenchido itself has a bunch of annoyin' folk too, but no more than ya'd get in your average workplace, I'd say. For the super annoyin' old-timers, I blow off steam by imagining them on their hands and feet, at my mercy. Hard to get mad once you've got that image of them begging for their mommy because of you."

I burst out laughing. "*That's* what you do for stress relief?! Welp, that's actually very you."

"Sure is! But I genuinely recommend it." Nago-chan snickered, then called for the waitress like we were at one of her regular bars. "Oh, hey, miss! Mind if we order?"

Then she did the very feminine thing of ordering a sandwich.

You go, girl!

I did the same, and while we waited for our food, we started making up for lost time by getting into an enthusiastic discussion about yaoi. Obviously, it was the thought of sandwiches that sparked our talk.

Once our coffee and sandwiches arrived and we started digging in, I decided it was time to move on to business.

"Hey, can I ask you for a favor?"

Nago-chan took a bite of her sandwich. "So ya didn't just miss me; ya want somethin' off me?"

"As sure as yuri is pure!"

"Not even hidin' it, huh?" Nago-chan swallowed her bite of sandwich. "But go ahead and ask. What're best friends for otherwise?"

"Okay, so I'm actually creating an indie mobile game with some pals of mine."

"Oh, yeah, I know all about it. There was that guy who came to our booth, right? His circle was called the 05th Floor Alliance."

"That's the one."

"He came off as a total wannabe to me back then. I can't believe

how big he's gotten now. Like, I'm actually amazed. And you're makin' real waves with *Koyagi* as well, right?"

"I think I'm even more surprised than you. It's crazy to think we've made it this far without the backing of a major publisher."

"Oh, I think I get it. You're workin' with this shota, right? And ya got a taste of the good stuff?"

I spat out my coffee. "I-I didn't get a taste of anything!" I couldn't trust this "best friend" of mine when she came out with dirty quips like that out of the blue—relating to real people, no less! "Anyway, Aki's not a shota. He's too old."

"Still not legal, though, is he?"

"Quit pushing it! And that isn't even close to why I'm still with the Alliance."

"Guh ha ha ha! Sure is fun to rile ya up!"

This lady was a total sadist and she made it look so innocent! Hopefully she hadn't forgotten I knew every last one of her kinks—especially the ones that couldn't be mentioned in polite company! I could literally blab about them to a trashy magazine or one of those drama channels on YTube and get her canceled! Not that I was gonna do that!

"What about this mobile game, then?"

"We're gonna make a console version."

"Damn, pretty impressive for an indie team. If you're gonna go the whole hog like that, might be worth thinkin' about findin' a company to publish ya."

"I think that's what we're already doing. Which brings me to that favor, Nago-chan—"

"Nope."

"I haven't even told you what it is yet!"

"I can guess by the way this convo's goin', dummy. Ya wanted me to help ya out with this stuff, right?"

"Nr... I mean, yeah..."

My buddy was way too sharp. Which was also part of the reason I could rely on her so much.

"It'd just be really handy for us to have a teammate with knowledge of the console market," I explained. "But you won't do it?"

"Sure won't. Plus, Tenchido doesn't let ya have a second job."

"Neither does my school!"

"Duh, I know that! All that means is ya could get in trouble, but that's got nothin' to do with me!"

I thought I had her, but she dodged my scathing comeback perfectly! She was born and raised in Kansai, only coming to Kanto for college, so really she was a Kansai girl through-and-through—and that gave her an impressive wit.

“Right... Aw, I was looking forward to getting to work with you again, Nago-chan, but I guess it’s not happening...” I looked up at her demurely, letting my eyes water.

“Hngh...”

I was using a traditional ninja technique of the Kageishi bloodline that made deadly use of the eyes, and I knew it would pierce right through the heart of my trusty friend.

By the way, I just made all of that up.

But it still worked! Nago-chan massaged her temples and sighed. “Fine. I’ll help ya out.”

“Really?!”

“I can’t actually join the team. But I can introduce ya to some trustworthy outsourcers. Even with your main staff, as ya make your game bigger, there’ll come a time you’ll need outsiders to help with UI and events and stuff. I know a good studio that can help, so I’ll pass ya their details.”

“Nago-chan!” I wailed. “Thank you!”

“I told ya not to cling to me like that!”

“Gotcha! The outsourcing company was caught!”

“Stop makin’ it sound like a big deal! If the CEO or legal catches wind of this, I’m screwed, okay?”

After that, we reminisced about the past and sang the praises of our most sacred religion: yaoi. Time flew by, and before we knew it, Nago-chan had to go back to her station on the battlefield (i.e. work). I stayed behind in the lounge, scrolling through social media on my phone—which also meant I’d be able to respond to any emergencies right away.

Obviously I wasn’t just messing around on social media. I was researching character design. Seeing what was in right now, looking up art techniques, and finding out which aspects to give your characters that’d make it easier for people to draw fan art of them. Though I’m well aware it wasn’t very teacherly of me to do this during work.

Eventually, the view outside the window grew dimmer and dimmer.

“The students’ll be finishing up their free day now. Good thing we didn’t have any emergencies.”

No news is good news, after all, and I was genuinely relieved my phone hadn’t buzzed a single time that day.

Oh. Maybe I was celebrating prematurely. Wasn’t it practically a law of nature that the moment you thought you’d won something, it would turn out you actually lost the very next second?

In which case, I wouldn’t make any assumptions till the day was

properly over!

Bzz! Bzz! Bzz! Bzz!

“Oh, come on! I said I *wasn't* making any assumptions!”

The social media app I had open switched to the screen notifying me of an incoming call. A number flashed up on the screen, but it wasn't one I had saved, so I didn't know who was calling me. We teachers couldn't save every last student's number after all; we'd just handed ours over to them for emergency use. And if I was being called by an unknown number at a time like this, it was bound to be a student.

“*Please* let this be something minor!” I prayed to God or Buddha or whoever it was and answered the call.

“*Sensei? That you?*”

“Oh, I know that voice. Otoi-san?”

“*Yup, 'sme. Got a sec?*”

“Of course,” I replied, my voice still a little strained—but on the inside, I was relieved. Judging by Otoi-san's drawl, whatever the problem she had to report wasn't that big. It'd be something inoffensive, like she wanted to try one more traditional dessert before coming back to the hotel, and she was after my recommendation.

“*Y'see...*”

“Mhm?”

“*Kohinata's gone missin'.*”

“...Sorry, what?”

I felt the blood drain from my face. Missing. Seriously? Wasn't that, like, among the *most major* of problems?!

My brain had started to recline in its seat, so I quickly hoisted it back up and opened up my mental manual to look up what I was supposed to do in this situation.

Do I call the police first? Or do I call the missing person? Or should I contact the class rep?

I couldn't pick out the smartest course of action between them.

How did this even happen? I couldn't imagine Ozuma-kun of all people getting lost. He had a good head on his shoulders and could bend the elements of technology completely to his will.

Also, did this mean Otoi-san and Ozuma-kun were spending their free day together? Was this a new potential ship, formed right under my nose, and I hadn't even realized it? Huh... My top three spicy ships for Otoi-san were with Aki, Iroha-chan, or Midori-chan, but Ozuma-kun was a new one. But maybe this meant there was something equally delicious about them I just needed to dig for!

“Wait...”

While my brain was playing helmsman, I found my gaze slipping to one side—just in time to see Ozuma-kun returning to the hotel.

Once he was in the lobby, he spotted me in the lounge and gave me a polite nod.

“Ozuma-kun’s just got back to the hotel,” I told Otoi-san over the phone.

“*Oh, not him...*”

“Not him? Then who?”

Kohinata wasn’t exactly a common name, and I didn’t *think* there was more than one among the second years.

“*His sister. Kohinata Iroha.*”

“Huh? Iroha-chan? What? Wait. *What?* What’s Iroha-chan doing in Kyoto?”

“*Don’t make me explain; it’s too much effort. Just help me look for her.*”

“Hold up. It’s kinda hard for me to swallow this story *without* an explanation. At least gimme something! Games have tutorials for a reason, y’know!”

“*Just come to Tenchido Eternaland, ’kay? See y’there.*”

The phone line went dead—and I know *I* didn’t press the button.

“You’re kidding...”

Iroha-chan was in Kyoto, *and* she’d gone missing? There were too many pieces missing in this puzzle. Everything in my mind was jumbled.

Was this even my responsibility to deal with? A student from the year below, who wasn’t even on the class trip, had gone missing, so...

I couldn’t find anything about it in my mental manual, but I decided it didn’t matter.

There was no precedent for this, and I didn’t know what to do. That meant there was only one thing I *should* do.

I was worried about Iroha-chan, so I needed to get over there. It was that simple!

“You going somewhere?” Ozuma-kun called out to me as I stood up and moved from the lounge to the lobby.

Perfect timing—I need to let him know what’s going on!

“Iroha-chan’s gone missing, and I’m off to find her. Mind tagging along, Ozuma-kun?”

“...What?”

Yeah, that was pretty much my reaction too.

Epilogue 2: Meeting with the CEO

“I’d like you to spread my works farther than I can spread my wings, chirp! The battle stuff, the war stuff, the romantic comedies—all of it!”

One room of my apartment had been converted into a studio. The soundproofing and acoustics were perfect, as was the top-of-the-line equipment, and it was all offset by a ton of deliberately disorganized posters of cute anime girls. In front of the PC monitor was another girl, this one supremely angelic, striking a pose.

That’s right! It was everyone’s favorite seventeen-year-old, Kiraboshi Kanaria, in the middle of a *super* popular stream!

“I’ll catch you all on the flappity-flap! Bye-bye!”

Actually, I wasn’t so much in the middle of the stream as right at the end. After saying an adorable goodbye to the viewers, I clicked the button to end the stream.

It was time to switch off for a bit. But first, I needed to make sure the stream had ended properly, using both my PC and various phones. That would prevent any bloopers from being sent out, and it was the professional thing for an idol to do, chirp! Sometimes I *pretended* I forgot to switch off the screen, but those times were completely calculated!

“Whew, that’s another stream over without any hiccups. Now I’ve got that meeting to get to, chirp.” I kept up my persona even when talking to myself. I was in a first-rate job where even a single slipup could cost me everything. Every utterance had to be carefully considered when you were an idol.

I stood up from my chair and left my special studio. It should be obvious, but the PC I use for streaming and the PC I use for work meetings are not one and the same. Even meetings for some of the bigger projects, where a leak could be devastating, were done at home nowadays. It was all due to the rise in remote meetings.

As both a first-rate idol and a first-rate working woman, I therefore needed to do everything I could to reduce risks. Thank God my fancy tower apartment had so many rooms.

And so, I entered the room I set up for my editing work and started up the laptop before accessing the URL for the meeting. I was right on time too.

“Why, hello there. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting.”

“Hello, Tsukinomori-san. I only just got here myself.”

On the screen was a man in the prime of his life with a fine air about him and a face I'd seen several times in recent months. On that face was a mustache that reminded me of nobility. This was Tsukinomori Makoto, CEO of Honeyplace Works, a huge entertainment company that worked in publishing, games, anime, and almost any other media form you could think of.

“Oh, yeah, you were streaming just now, right? As Canary? Chirp chirp.”

“Awww, no! Quit making a fowl of me, chirp! These talons have many talents, you know! Like disemboweling!”

“That’s a real cute act, but I can tell from your eyes you’re serious...which is kinda a shame. Still, I have to admire you for daring to hold a meeting like this immediately after a stream. What if you made a boo-boo and accidentally streamed this very secret meeting to the entire world?”

“That’s never gonna happen, chirp! I split up the PCs and the rooms I use for work and streaming. Plus, even if something did happen and I got my tail feathers sued, I can fork out a couple billion yen no problem.”

“Damn rich kid... It makes you annoying, y’know?”

“Says the guy who probably has more money than me, chirp!”

“I can’t deny it. Ah...” Tsukinomori-san paused and twiddled his mustache. The creases on his age-worn face deepened as his mouth stretched into a grin. *“Even through the monitor, you look as gorgeous as ever.”*

Those words made me decide to secretly switch modes. A certain level of small talk was important, but too much risked things getting too casual, which could have a negative influence on the work itself.

I was no longer the idol Canary-chan now, but Hoshino Kana.

“It’s an honor to receive such praise. I’d like to move on to the topic of *Snow White’s Revenge Classroom* now, if that’s okay.”

“Hrmph. Yes, let’s get down to business.”

Tsukinomori-san looked slightly taken aback for a moment, probably because I deflected his compliment. He was your typical member of the previous generation. There were plenty of things to be admired about them, but the way he spoke to women could feel somewhat backwards at times.

I felt it best practice as his business partner to respond with a firm, silent rejection to such remarks, or even give him a light scolding if the situation called for it.

“We’re looking at making both a game and an anime for the series, neither of which have gotten off the ground so far because the author stubbornly refused to give approval. But now that Mashiro’s on board, we

should be able to make a lot of progress in a short amount of time. Things are pretty chaotic around here right now."

"Our company's the same. The editing department—well, me, I guess—is all hands on deck. I'm now in need of personnel who can support my work, and our sales plan needs to be rejigged... There's all sorts going on. I'm not complaining, though; it's all for a very exciting reason."

Tsukinomori-san laughed. *"They're working you hard, I see. We've been prepared for this though, and have the right staff and studios for the job ready to go."*

"That we aren't similarly ready is a failing on our part." The smile I threw him was less than genuine, because frankly I was peeved off at his humble bragging. But as a shining star of society, I had to remain polite!

In reality, I'd been requesting extra staff for the eventual expansion of *Snow White* for ages—only for the straitlaced big shots at the top to tell me it would probably end up a waste, because there was no guarantee the author would ever agree to an adaptation. It was with a heavy heart that I had given in.

I could still remember how I mentally berated them. Didn't they know that gathering resources for an eventual disaster *after* it happened was totally useless? Or were they just a bunch of idiots sitting up on their high managerial horses? Hmph!

It had taken a lot to convince the higher-ups to let me have an idol persona alongside editing, and my constant results proved it to be the right choice, regardless of "precedent."

I guess persuading them to hire more people was on a whole other level of difficulty. I could see why. They didn't mind me doing what I wanted by myself, but the moment it cost them money, it was out. Remember that thing I said about disemboweling, chirp?

So you can imagine why it ruffled my feathers to hear the CEO of Honeyplace Works boasting like that when he was the one holding the company's purse strings. It wasn't like I was about to sit around being a lazy goose either, though.

"I'm in the process of privatizing my idol business. Once that's all gone through legally, I'm going to be hiring some assistants myself. Luckily, I've already been poaching people the second they've shown promise."

"I should have known you'd be all set."

"More or less. What is it you wanted to talk to me about today, by the way? Something about a project you wanted to set up at the same time as the *Snow White* anime?"

"Oh yeah, about that. You know it takes years for an anime to move from the planning stage to the broadcasting stage, yes?"

“Of course I know that, yes.”

“Well, around the time *Snow White* would be due to broadcast, *Honeyplace* would likely be publishing their—the 05th Floor Alliance’s—game too.”

“You mean *Koyagi*?!”

“Yeah. Strangely apt, don’t you think? *Makigai Namako* works on the scenario for both. I’m thinking we can put them out at the same time.”

“I see. They do have a similar style that would make them compatible.”

Was Tsukinomori-san just after a collaboration? Linking two releases by the same author wasn’t exactly a rarity, so I didn’t see why he was contacting me about it directly instead of just waiting to go through the official channels. There had to be more to this.

“There’s more to this, of course.”

“I can see why you’re in entertainment, but there’s no need to mess me around.”

“I want to create a link between the two IPs on top of their shared writer.”

“Yes?”

“The voice actress for the Alliance. As far as the public is concerned, the voices are provided by a ‘Phantom Voice Troupe.’ But in fact they are all provided by one girl. Did you know that?”

“Oh yes? I had a hunch it was just the one person.”

I was an idol, remember. I had lessons in acting and singing, and I put everything into those skills. Enough for me to realize something was up.

“So, I was thinking of having her play the lead in the anime.”

“You mean the *Snow White* anime?”

“Yup. First, we have an indie game joining forces with a major company. Then we divulge the identity of the secret voice actress. On top of that, we reveal that she is to take the lead anime role for one of the light novel industry’s up-and-coming stars. Tell me that’s not gonna get people talking—a lot.”

“You’re not wrong. She’s a talented girl, and pairing the anime with the birth of a new star is going to send enthusiasm about the IP skyrocketing. Although there’s no guarantee she’ll be able to handle anime voice acting when she’s only had experience in video games.”

“That’s something she can learn with careful training. But for now, it’s a real help to have you on board with the idea. Means I can start putting the plan into action.”

“Can I ask something else before you do?”

“Yes?”

“Will revealing her identity actually be possible? There has to be a reason Aki-kun is keeping it a secret. Otherwise, the public would

have known her name already.”

“Right, about that. I have a theory—something I’ve put together after looking into this and that—and I think I’m onto something here.” Keeping his well-aged features stern, Tsukinomori-san turned his phone’s screen to the PC camera. There was a photograph of a couple on it.

“By ‘looking into this and that,’ did you mean stalking?”

“I’m trying to be serious over here. This is from the recent culture festival, when Akiteru-kun danced with this girl.”

“That’s Aki-kun? No, he’s far too handsome and— Oh!”

All of a sudden, it came rushing back to me: how Aki-kun had come to me for advice on dressing up as a girl. I had handed him over to Tomosaka-san then and left it at that, but I now realized Aki-kun was the girl in this photo.

“So you’re saying the girl he danced with is the voice actress? Oh, but I recognize her...”

“Yes, I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve made her acquaintance. This is Kohinata Iroha. She lives in the same apartment building as Akiteru-kun and Mashiro.”

“Kohinata Iroha? She’s the voice actress?”

As I recalled, she was a good-looking girl—but she hadn’t left a very strong impression on me as a creative. If I had to describe it, she didn’t seem to have a well-defined sense of self. I remembered her as a good-looking, even charming, girl. But that was it.

“Even I couldn’t send a spy into the school to keep an eye on Akiteru-kun and his little gang. The culture festival was different, because they allowed outsiders onto the school grounds. It was a golden opportunity. Not only did I get feedback on how they were together, but I learned what the other students thought of them too.”

“I’m pretty sure you toed some kind of line there.”

“I’m just looking out for my wife and daughter, who I love dearly.”

“Murder is murder, no matter how justified.”

Once you crossed a certain line, you were a criminal. There were no two ways about it.

“Anyway, my point is, I picked up on something kinda interesting. Apparently, Kohinata Iroha-kun once helped out the drama club, winning them the prefectural fair. Those students who watched her perform say she displayed quite a lot of talent.”

“I see. That definitely sounds like something worth digging into.”

No matter his impressive knack of forming powerful personal connections, Aki-kun was still a teenager. It would make sense to think his voice actress was somebody talented he’d chosen from those around him, rather than someone already established.

“But, say this actress is Kohinata Iroha-kun, that raises a bit of a red flag.”

“And what would that be?”

“Launching a plan to raise Iroha-kun to star status means making an enemy of her mother: Tenchido CEO, Amachi-san.”

“What?” I raised my eyebrows at his sudden mention of Tenchido, and I couldn’t immediately see the connection.

“Amachi is her maiden name. Her legal name is Kohinata Otoha. She’s Iroha-kun’s mom.”

“What? But I thought Amachi-san—”

“I know. As does the entire industry. She dislikes all forms of entertainment. Though she’s happy to collaborate if it makes business sense, she uses everything to her advantage to keep her company at the top. The licenses and assets to the company’s powerhouse IPs. Production. Brand, financial, and legal power. In the entertainment industry as a whole, she has a ton of influence. Do you really think a woman like her would want her daughter launching a career as an actress?”

“I think that’s a pretty easy ‘no.’”

Even I was shuddering in my boots. Our publisher’s had no direct dealings with Tenchido, yet even we heard stories of how they ran things. Your average user didn’t know squat, and it was never reported on in magazines or online. However, step one foot into an industry gathering, and the rumors would already be flying. Even then, for all I knew about Amachi-san, I still had no idea *why* she held such a grudge.

“You certainly seem to know a lot about her, Tsukinomori-san, unlike me. I’ve never worked with her. Did you have a run-in with her in the past or something?”

He didn’t respond immediately. It seemed to me like he was mulling something over. Even through the screen, I could see the grim tautness of his features, like it was taking a great deal of consideration to answer my question.

After a while, he opened his mouth again, hesitantly.

“Okay... Assuming Iroha-kun is the Alliance’s voice actress, and that’s a path she wants to pursue, I suppose I don’t really have a choice but to talk about this. Especially if we want to develop a plan to make her a star.” There was none of the light, bouncing tone in his voice that he’d been using up until now. Instead, he sounded resigned and reluctant, like this was something he wasn’t enthused about remembering either.

“Let me guess. Amachi-san was also...”

“An aspiring actress, yes,” Tsukinomori-san replied readily. *“She was extraordinarily talented. Anybody could see the future held great things for her,”* he continued.

And then things changed.

Frustration tightened his jaw.

Guilt colored his features.

Hatred made his fists tremble.

It was like the shadow of his memory was looping a noose around his neck.

“Those adults—they betrayed her. They treated her like trash, then threw her out like garbage.”

Afterword

Hello, author mikawaghost here. Have you already finished enjoying volume 9 of *My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me*?

After having very little presence in the first volume covering the class trip, Iroha makes up for it in this one (even though she's a first-year) by reuniting with Akiteru and even scoring a date with him. Mashiro's there to continue her efforts to win his heart from the previous volume too of course, so I'm hoping her fans were satisfied as well. We've got a ton of other characters here to brighten up the *ImoUza* world on top of that: Otoi-san, Mizuki, Otoha, Canary, Sasara, and Midori. They'll be playing bigger roles from now on too, so please look forward to the next volumes to come.

So, this volume was mainly set at the amusement park, and I got to write some date scenes where our characters experienced a variety of attractions.

You might remember from a previous afterword that I mentioned going to a high-class French restaurant by myself to help write the story. That's because I'm the type of author who will go and do the fieldwork whenever necessary, and so this time I'd decided I would go to an amusement park. And of course, I'm single, so I couldn't go there as a date, and I felt super awkward about going by myself.

Unfortunately, I was writing volume 9 at a time when the entire nation was being warned not to leave the house unnecessarily. In the end, I wrapped up the volume without ever going on my lonely trip to the amusement park.

It's a real shame, but what can you do? I wasn't even *scared* of the hellish experience that was going all by myself—I just didn't feel like I could go when everyone was so firmly told not to go out. And that's not an excuse. I swear.

Now I'd like to move on to the acknowledgments.

To my illustrator, Tomari-sensei. Thank you for your incredible drawings once again! Iroha's looking as vibrant as ever, and you've drawn her and the other characters so wonderfully. I was trying to give as many characters as possible a chance to shine in this volume, to the extent that it was a bit of a headache. But I'm going to keep putting together scenes that will let you draw lots of different sides to lots of different characters, and I hope you're looking forward to it as much as I am!

To Hiraoka Hira-sensei, who's drawing *ImoUza*'s manga version. I really enjoy reading the manga each time a new one comes out. Let's keep working together to make *ImoUza* as exciting a series as possible!

To my editor, Nuru-san, the editorial department, and everyone else at GA Bunko, and above all else, my readers! Somehow we've made it to two whole years of serialization, and are about to jump right into the third. Thank you so much for sticking by me for so long. I hope you'll keep supporting *ImoUza* into the future too.

I'm running out of pages now, so I'll sign off.

That's all from me,
mikawaghost

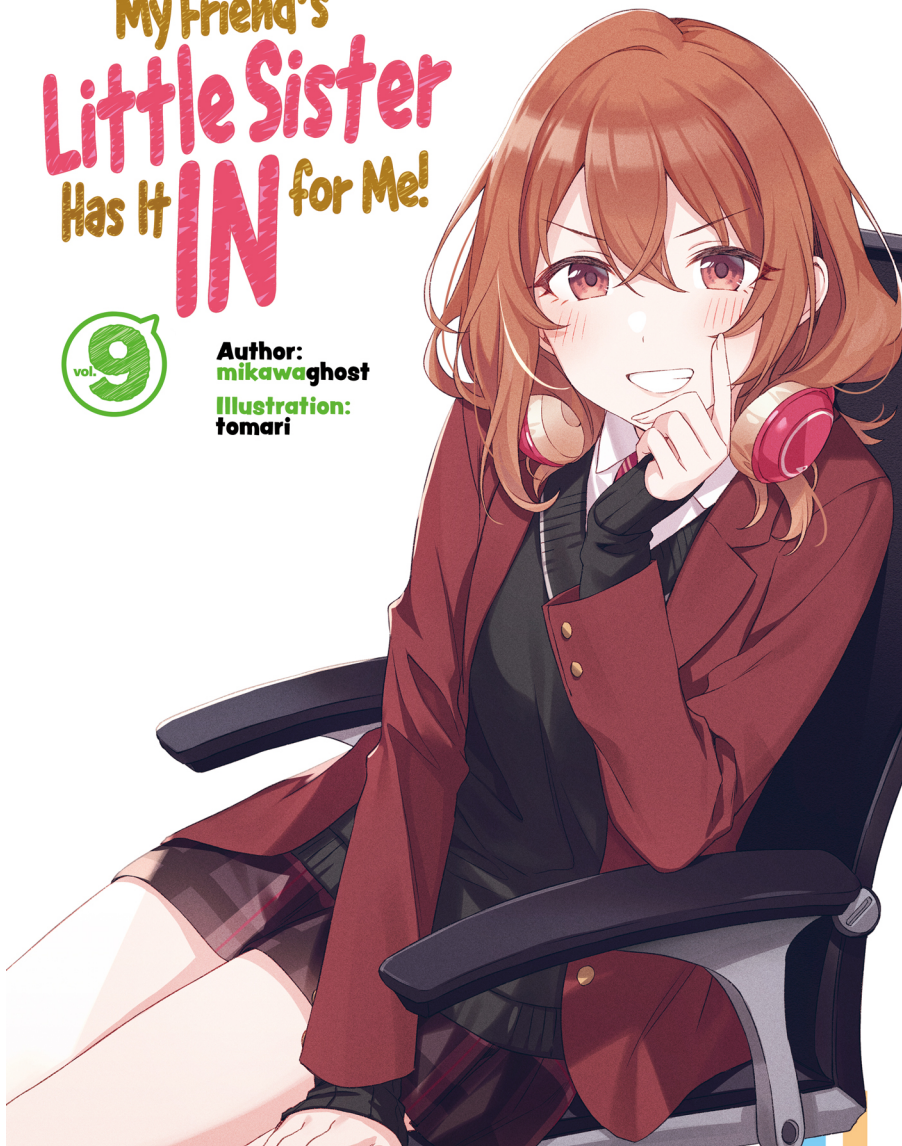


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My Friend's
Little Sister
Has It **IN** for Me!



Author:
mikawaghost
Illustration:
tomari





"A boyfriend is
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to his girlfriend's
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"You're my
boyfriend,
Aki."

"I want us to
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“Could you
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you’re ready?”

“I’ll get
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away, and—
Iroha?!”

“Huh?
S-Senpai?!”

“What are
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Aaah!

Eeek!

Omgosh,
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much fun!

Yahoo!

You think so
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Aha ha ha!

"I've got no
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My
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Sister

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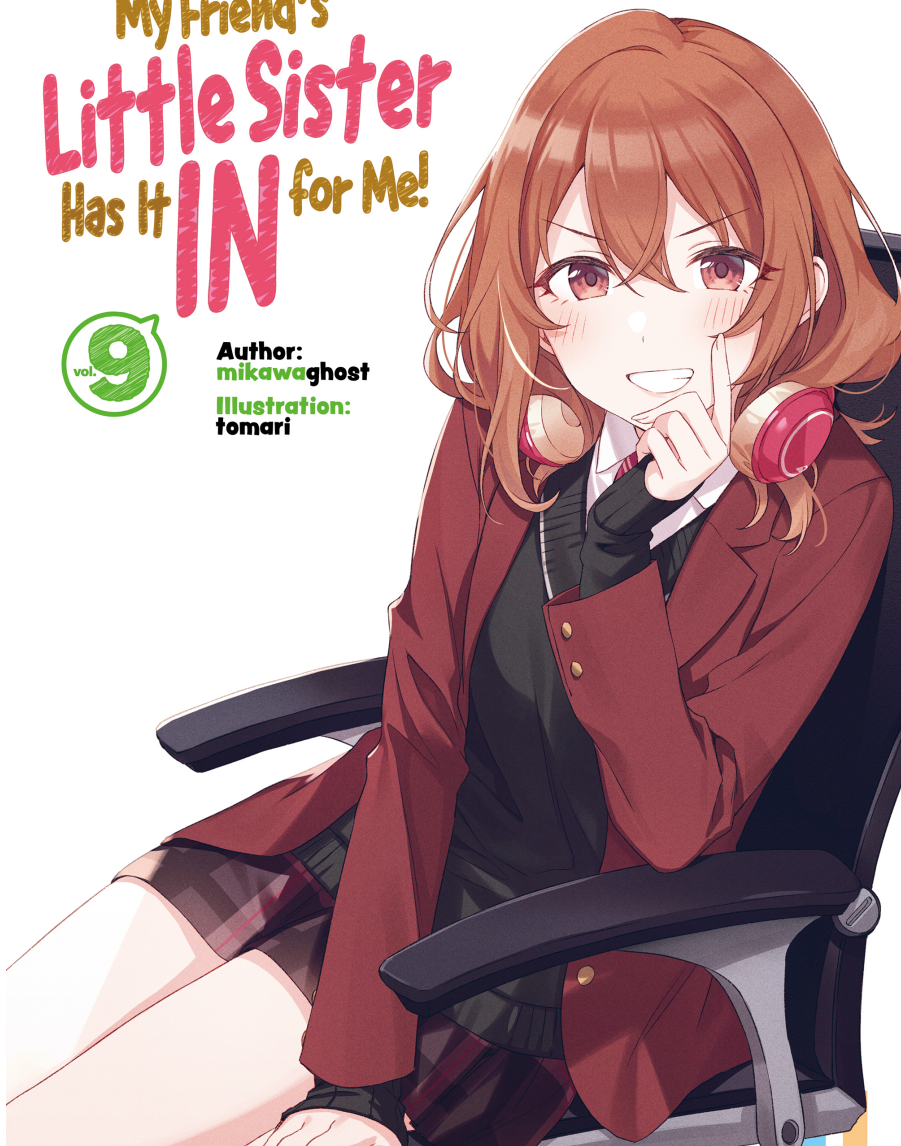


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My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me! Volume 9

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NIDAKE UZAI Vol. 9

by mikawaghost

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